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by **WILLIAM HEUMAN**

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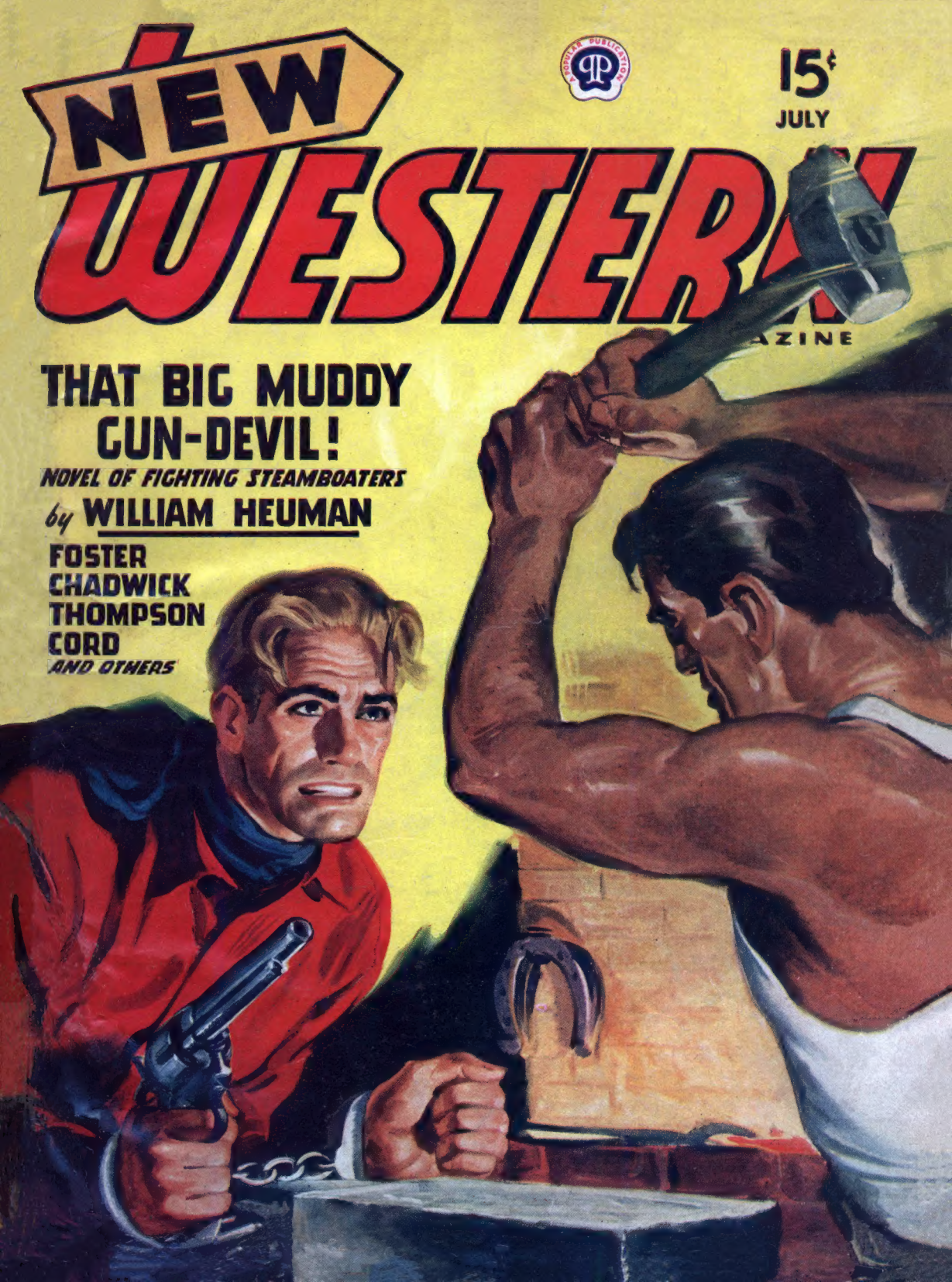

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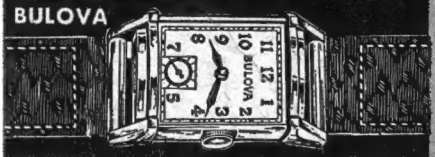

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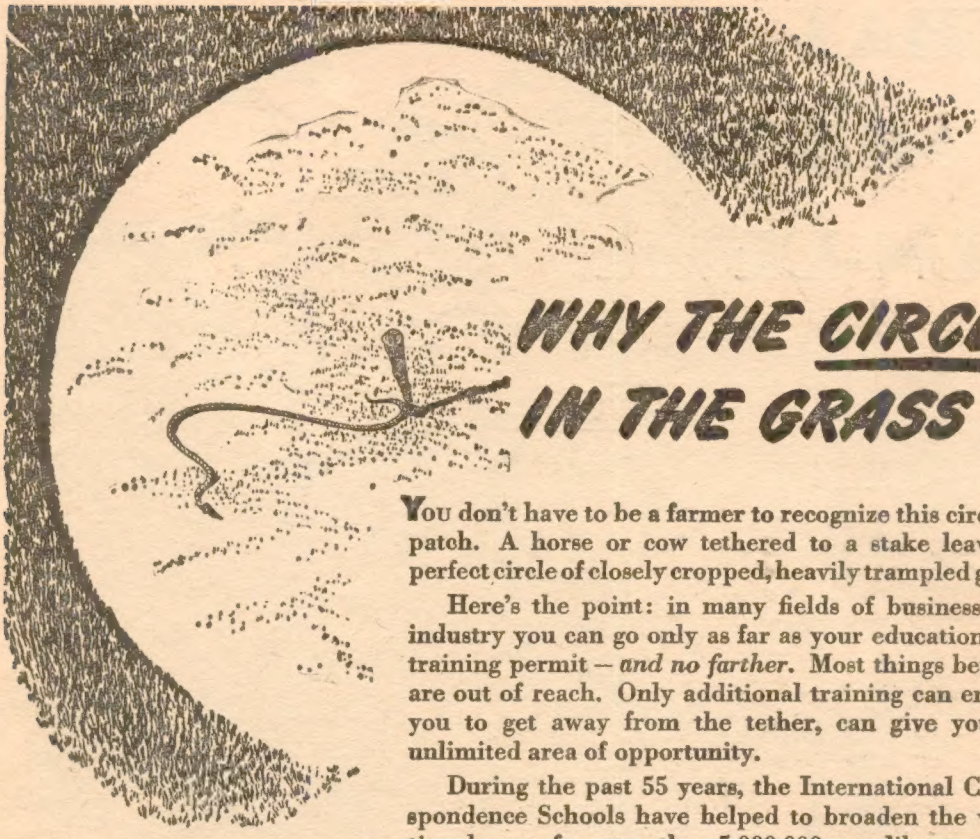

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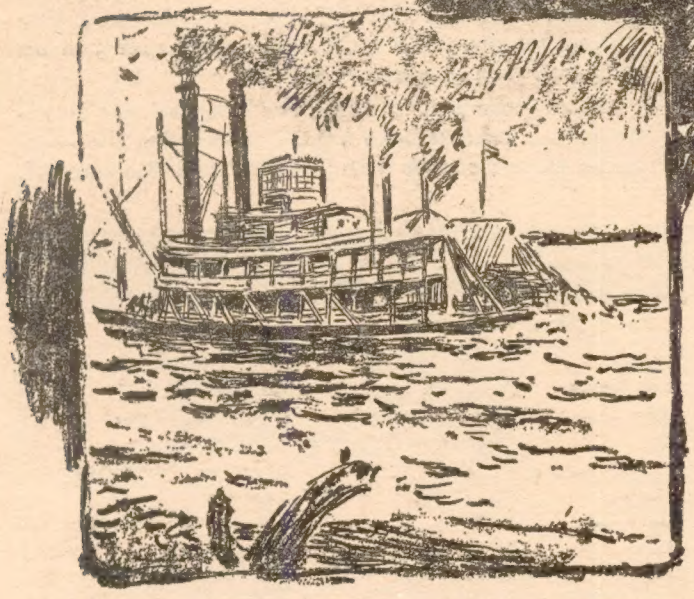
THAT BIG MUDDY GUN-DEVIL!

"Looks like Ben rammed her into the bank so his crew and passengers could get ashore!" Cannivan shouted.

By WILLIAM HEUMAN



Smashing Novel of Riverboat War

For Adam McCall, hold-out river skipper, there was no short cut from Battle City to Paradise. Only a one-way graveyard-run, straight through the flame-charred fleet of sunken hulls that Morgan Slade's ruthless packet-combine had sent to the inky floor of Big Muddy!

CHAPTER ONE

Sidewheeler's Ashes

THE Big Muddy wound like a huge brown snake across the open plains and in and out among high, sandy bluffs. There was a certain coolness which came to the Missouri at dusk after the heat of a long August day. Captain Adam McCall, standing behind the big wheel in the pilot house of the sternwheeler packet, *Judy Greene,* mopped his sweaty face with a handkerchief and studied the brown current sweeping toward him out of the Twin Sisters' Channel.

It had been hot during the day as only the upper Missouri is hot in mid summer. The pilot house had baked in the steaming river, but now with the window down and the cool breeze sweeping in, Adam McCall relaxed a little.

A full moon was swinging up above Indian Bluff on the right bank of the river; bright pin points of stars appeared in the eastern sky. A coyote was howling off in the distance, a high, poignant sound against the stillness of the evening.

Gripping the big wheel with his powerful hands, Adam McCall swung the sternwheeler in toward the high bluff on the right bank, thus avoiding the full force of the Missouri River current. The Twin Sisters' Channel was tricky even in the day time; at night, with only six feet of water running over the Shark Tooth ledge, and seventy-five feet of open river between the east island and the bank, the run could almost be classified as dangerous.

Calmly, Adam rang his bell for full speed as they hit the main current coming through

the Channel. He felt the powerful little packet quiver as the big sternwheel dug into the muddy water. He was grinning as the *Judy Greene* moved up the passageway, veering neither to the right nor to the left. He kept the nose of the boat pointed straight at the tip of the eastern Twin Sister Island which jutted out into the channel, and then he turned in again toward the bank, thankful for the full moon which enabled him to plot his course with a degree of accuracy.

The starboard of the packet touched overhanging tree boughs as it moved past the tip of the island and across the dangerous Shark Tooth Ledge out into deeper water.

Adam McCall took a deep breath and pushed his cap back on his head. He turned the *Judy Greene* out into the middle of the river, and he felt some of the tension go out of his big frame. He stood flat-footed behind the wheel, enjoying the night breeze, and then he saw the red glow in the sky to the north.

Sixty seconds later he heard steps pounding on the stairway leading from the Texas deck, and then Mate Ed Cannivan came through the door, breathing heavily from his run. He said tersely,

"You see it, Adam?"

"Fire," Adam McCall said quietly. "We're still more than ten miles from Battle City and that glow is less than two miles from here."

Ed Cannivan took up a position directly behind the wheel, looking over Adam's shoulder. He said tersely,

"Ben Hallman's *Northern Star* was two hours ahead of us this morning, but I'm hoping that's a woodhawk's cabin going up in flames, and not a river boat."

Adam shook his head. His gray eyes were narrowed, and a certain hardness had come to his jaw. He said, "That glow is too big for a cabin, Ed. I've seen burning packets before." He took a deep breath and then sounded his whistle several times.

The hoarse bellow hung on the river for several moments as the *Judy Greene* pushed up against the strong current at full speed.

Cannivan said slowly, "Ben Hallman wouldn't go into the combine, Adam. Did you know that?"

"I knew it," Adam said.

"So his boat is burning down to the water," the mate grated, "and Morgan Slade is supposed to be in Battle City. What do you make of that?"

"If they touch my boat," Adam McCall said, "I'll kill Slade. I'll kill him slowly." He caressed the spokes of the big wheel and he remembered the years he'd spent saving his money—his pilots' wages, making dozens of trips up and down the Big Muddy, risking his scalp when the Sioux were on the warpath, sometimes with a tub of a boat beneath him and rusted, clogged, boilers in the engine room, threatening to blow him sky-high any moment.

He'd picked up the *Judy Greene* for a song along the mile long wharf in St. Louis; he'd found her rotting after a hard winter, engines badly in need of repairs, boilers gone, an entire new hull needed.

For five months he'd labored with his own hands on the packet because he'd seen the wood in her, and he liked the lines. She had a draft of less than fifteen inches, and he was confident he could take her through water where no other Missouri River captain would dare to go. Making late summer trips up to the Montana goldfields, when other packets were already headed downriver for fear of low water, he could bring down the last big cargos of the year, passengers, freight, and gold dust. The last boat downriver was always assured of the biggest profits.

He'd been unable to get the *Judy* in shape for an early summer trip because he'd encountered difficulty securing a loan for the purchase of new boilers and stacks. The packet was heavily mortgaged now, but one successful run of the river, and the last boat down from Paradise City, would net him as much as twenty thousand dollars with all expenses paid, and put him in the black.

All through the early summer, while working on the packet, he'd thought of this trip, and then he'd heard rumors of the combine operating on the upper Missouri. A ruthlessly efficient organization of river boat owners had been formed on the upper river, headed by an easterner, Morgan Slade. Boat after boat had gone into the combine, entitled the Great Western Packet Company, and those boats which had refused to sign up with the organization had run into all kinds of trouble.

In St. Louis and other down river towns, merchants and passengers were putting up violent protests because of the unreason-

ably high freight rates and fares the Great Western Packet Company boats were charging.

The honest, independent packet captains, attempting to do business on the old order and at fair rates, were being ham-strung all along the river. Mysterious fires broke out in the holds; unaccountable trouble developed in the engine rooms. The side-wheeler *Thomas Daye,* going through the Hat Island Channel had had its twin stacks ripped from the decks by strong manila ropes strung across the Channel.

There were other stories Adam McCall had heard—of crews being beaten up in Battle City, of packet captains shot down from dark alleys in the boisterous port, springboard for the Missouri River traffic.

MATE ED CANNIVAN was saying quietly, "Ben Hallman loved his boat, too, Adam. I feel damned sorry for Ben if that's his *Northern Star* going up in flames."

Adam McCall stared upriver at that ominous glow. As they moved around Elbow Bend they could see flames and sparks near the left bank of the river.

"Fire's on the water," Cannivan said tersely. "Looks like Ben rammed her into the bank when he spotted the flames so that his crew and passengers could get ashore."

Five minutes later the red glow from the burning wreck ruddied Adam McCall's tense jaws as he turned the *Judy Greene* in toward the bank. One of the *Northern Star's* smokestacks suddenly collapsed, falling into the water with a terrific hissing sound.

On the bank Adam could see several fires burning with groups of people standing around them. Ed Cannivan said quietly,

"Reckon Ben got 'em all ashore. He'd see to that."

Adam rang the landing bell and the packet was snubbed into the bank. Some of Ben Hallman's crew caught the ropes and tied them around trees. Adam went ashore, walking over the planks his crew had set down.

Fifty yards up river and a short distance from the shore the *Northern Star* was still burning with the breeze blowing the sparks the other way. The fire was down to the water line now.

Adam nodded to the gray-faced Hallman standing on the bank, an unlit cigar in his mouth. Hallman was a short, stocky, gray-haired man. He'd been mate aboard several boats on which Adam had hired out as pilot. He'd liked Hallman and had been glad when the day came that Ben could buy his own packet.

"Too bad," Adam said.

Hallman only nodded. He was watching the boat, deep lines in his face, as it settled in the water. The stern went down first, sparks shooting up into the night sky. There was a roaring sound like wind through trees.

The *Northern Star* rolled on its starboard side with another terrific shower of sparks. She settled in the water, sliding off the sand bar on which Captain Hallman had lodged her, and disappeared.

The sudden disappearance plunged the river into darkness. Ben Hallman struck a match and lighted his cigar. Adam McCall looked at his face in this dim light. Hallman was composed, but dead inside.

"Where did it start?" Adam asked him.

"In the hold or the cabins," Hallman said. "She was burning in both places when we discovered it. We fought her for half an hour before I decided to run into the bank."

Adam cleared his throat. "Tough," he said, "We'll take your passengers and crew to Battle City, Ben."

"Ten passengers," Hallman stated. "We were carrying mostly freight from St. Louis." He turned and started to walk toward the bonfires, Adam trailing behind him. Hallman stopped then and turned around. His voice sounded different as he spoke. He said slowly, "McCall I'm an older man than you are. I've been on the Missouri since I was sixteen years old. Take my advice. Don't ever carry a woman passenger on a Missouri river boat."

Before Adam could say anything, Hallman turned and continued toward the bonfires. Ed Cannivan, walking behind Adam, said softly,

"Ben was always a superstitious man, Adam."

At the nearest fire were four people, the one nearest Adam, back turned, wrapped in a heavy blanket, came around, hearing the steps. This was the woman passenger.

Adam touched his cap. She was small, black hair plastered against her head. She'd

been in the water and she looked like a forlorn little boy standing near the fire, shivering, teeth chattering. Her eyes were dark, and there was terror in them—something more than fear, and Adam noticed this immediately and was struck with it.

"Miss Blackwell," Ben Hallman said dully, "meet Captain McCall. I'm sure he will be able to accommodate you with a warm cabin until we reach Battle City."

"I will be much obliged to Captain McCall," the girl half-whispered. She looked at Hallman and she said, "I'm terribly sorry this happened to you, Captain Hallman."

"It's a hard life," Ben Hallman said, and Adam McCall knew he was finished on the river, the spirit gone from him.

Boat's clerk, Fred Baines, had come ashore with Cannivan, and turning to him, Adam said,

"Will you see that Miss Blackwell is made comfortable, Mr. Baines."

The girl flashed him a look of gratitude, and again he thought he saw that vague terror in her eyes, something which went beyond the fire on board the *Northern Star*—something which had been built up inside of her for a long time.

The other passengers followed Baines aboard the packet, but Ben Hallman stood in front of the big bonfire, staring into the flames. He said slowly,

"She seems like a nice girl, Adam, a very pleasant girl. She came aboard at Camp Stambaugh. Said she had to get up to Paradise City this summer. Why should I think ill of her?"

"Why should you?" Adam asked him.

"For this reason," Ben Hallman said, still looking into the flames. "She booked passage from St. Louis to Battle City on John Lane's packet, *General Fremonte*. Five miles below Camp Stambaugh the *General Fremonte* tore out her bottom on Buried Rock ledge. I picked her up at Stambaugh with the understanding that she could get another packet up to Paradise from that point." Hallman looked out across the river where his boat had gone down. He said slowly, "I'm finished, Adam. This is more than a coincidence."

"Hell," Adam said. "You'll have another boat in six months, Ben."

"Not me," Ben Hallman shook his head. "I have a farm back east. I'm going to it."

Adam McCall watched the captain walk toward the planks and go aboard. His crew followed. Ed Cannivan, standing nearby, shook his head. He said,

"Ben was a good river man, Adam. It's a shame." He added then thoughtfully, "Women are hard luck on the river, Adam. I'd think twice before I booked this girl."

Adam laughed. "You don't think she rammed John Lane's boat, and then set fire to Hallman's?" He remembered then that strange look in the girl's dark eyes, and the smile disappeared from his face.

The *Judy Greene* backed away from the shore fifteen minutes later, and Adam turned her upstream again. Ben Hallman sat up in the darkened pilot house with him, smoking his cigar, a silent man.

Adam said to him finally when they were out of sight of the spot where the packet had burned,

"You think Morgan Slade had anything to do with this, Ben?"

"I don't know," Hallman admitted. "Boats burn on the river all the time. Half of them nobody ever knows how they started."

"You turned down Great Western, didn't you?" Adam persisted.

"I wanted to run my own boat," Hallman said dully. "They talk to you?"

"Had a fellow come aboard the day before I pulled out from St. Louis," Adam admitted. "Kicked him off the boat."

Hallman cleared his throat. "More than half the boats on the river are in the combine now, Adam. It'll go hard for anybody tries to buck Slade."

"I'm bucking him," Adam McCall said.

"You're a young man," Ben Hallman told him. "You got the fight in you and you have your boat."

ADAM McCALL watched the moonlight play on the broad expanse of water in front of him. The Missouri widened out here till it was nearly a half mile from bank to bank, a gigantic yellow tide ever flowing toward the Mississippi and the sea, carrying trees and mud, carrying dead men, too, as the story had it, who tried to buck the Great Western Packet Company and Morgan Slade.

"No man's big enough to be king of the Big Muddy," Adam said slowly. "Slade will find that out."

Behind him he could hear Ben Hallman puffing on his pipe. Hallman said finally,

"Down in Camp Stambaugh I heard that Slade is kind of set against you, Adam, because you didn't sign up with him. They say he has Logan Brynn waiting in Battle City to work on you."

Adam grinned coldly. Brynn was a disreputable river tough, known to be exceedingly vicious with his fists. He was supposed to have been a bare knuckles fighter in his day, and Slade was said to be using him to intimidate the recalcitrants who would not sign up with the combine. He'd been effective.

"I won't by-pass Battle City," Adam said. "Never had any damned use for Brynn anyway."

Hallman was silent again. He didn't speak until they raised the lights of Battle City at nine o'clock in the evening. He said then, "That girl will want to book passage to Paradise with you, Adam. Take my advise. Don't book her."

Adam laughed. "I'll wait until she asks," he promised.

He saw the packets lined up along the log wharf, many of them boats on which he'd signed himself as pilot, many of them owned by men with whom he was intimate, but who now had signed up with the Great Western Packet Company. The low, sleek-looking *Anthony Wayne*, reputed to be the fastest packet on the river, was rocking gently at its moorings. It was known along the upper river as the floating headquarters of the mysterious Morgan Slade. At one time it had been owned and operated by the honest and likeable Hendrick Samuels, but Samuels had disappeared mysteriously, and the *Anthony Wayne* was captained by a man Adam had never liked, the sly, furtive Nathan Sears.

"Good luck to you, Adam," Ben Hallman said when Adam rang his landing bells and the *Judy Greene* drifted in toward the mooring. He picked his spot about four boats down from the *Anthony Wayne*.

With the boat tied up, he went down the stairs with Hallman and shook hands with him before the older man left the boat. Fred Baines came out of his office then, carrying a batch of papers. Baines was a small, bespectacled man. He said,

"Captain, Miss Blackwell would like to book passage with us up to Paradise City. It's a pretty rough trip beyond Battle City and I told her I would speak to you. We're probably the last boat going upriver and it seems to be pretty important to her that she go with us."

Adam McCall scratched his chin. He looked at Ed Cannivan standing near the gangplank, smoking a pipe. Cannivan shrugged.

"Hell of a place for a girl to want to go at this time of year," the mate observed. "Most women would be wanting to get out of Paradise for the winter."

Adam heard a cabin door opening up above him, and a moment later he saw Miss Blackwell coming down the stairs toward him. She had fixed up her hair and dried out her dress, but there were still wrinkles in it. She paused on the staircase.

"May I speak to you, Captain?"

Adam walked over to her. She had her face turned toward the moon, and the yellow light revealed every feature, the curve of her lips, the perfect ridge of the nose. She was a good-looking woman, but there was terror in her eyes. Adam said,

"What can I do for you, Miss Blackwell?"

"Please do not reject my application for passage on your boat," she said quietly. "I must reach Paradise, Captain."

Adam frowned. "You have been to Paradise before?" he asked. "I wouldn't recommend a youg lady to winter there if she didn't have to."

"I expect to buy a round-trip ticket, Captain," the girl said. "I shall return with you on your down-river trip."

Adam stared at her thoughtfully. It was over a thousand miles upriver from Battle City to Paradise. A two thousand mile-boat trip up and down the turbulent Missouri, and not always a pleasant one with dry, hot weather now, and the possibility of foul weather on the way back, was not the kind of trip a young lady would look forward to.

"It is very important that you reach Paradise City?" he asked.

"Of the utmost importance," the girl said.

Adam nodded. "We'll spend less than a day in Battle City," he told her. "I shall expect you on board at noon tomorrow." He saw the look of gratitude come into her eyes. Impulsively, she took his hand and squeezed it. Adam McCall reddened.

"I—I don't know how to thank you, Captain McCall," the girl said softly.

"Be on time when we cast off," Adam said gruffly. "I don't like to wait for passengers."

Miss Blackwell smiled at him and for one brief moment the tension went out of her face. Then it came back again, and Adam McCall thought of her like that as he walked toward the gangplank—a girl with a terrific burden on her mind, and with cold terror in her heart.

Ed Cannivan was smoking his pipe, sitting on one of the capstans. He said, "So she goes, Adam?"

"She goes," Adam said, "and to hell with superstition."

"I wish," Cannivan observed, "we could dispose of Morgan Slade as easily as that."

"We'll worry about Slade when the time comes," Adam said.

"We'd better worry about him now," the mate smiled. "One of his representatives is waiting for you on the wharf." Cannivan jerked his pipe toward the shore where a thin man in long, swallow-tail coat and high beaver hat was standing at the other end of the planks, smoking a cigar fitfully. "I told him," Cannivan said, "that no one came aboard the *Judy Greene* without your permission."

Adam nodded. He said, "Keep half the crew on board ship at all times. I'll be back in an hour or two."

"Take you that long to handle Logan Brynn?" Cannivan asked.

Adam had one foot on the planks. He said, "You hear that, too?"

"Ben Hallman's crew is talking about it," Cannivan said. "Why risk breaking your hands on that dog's hard skull?"

Adam laughed tersely. "Slade wants to see me crawl," he said, "so that I'll be the laughing stock along the river. I wouldn't crawl for the devil himself, much less that skunk."

Ed Cannivan looked at his pipe. "I could go along," he suggested, "in case some other of Slade's toughs try to help Brynn."

Adam shook his head. "I want one of us on board this boat all the time," he said. "I'd hate to see the *Judy Greene* go the way of the *Northern Star*."

The mate nodded at the reason in this. "Use your boots on Brynn," he suggested. "He'd do it to you, and you'll never be able to hurt him with your fists."

"I'll think about it," Adam laughed.

He started across the plank, and the Great Western Packet Company representative lifted his voice. It had a nasal twang to it which Adam did not like. The man called.

"Captain McCall?"

"That's right," Adam said. He stepped on the log wharf and put a cigar in his mouth.

"Heard you were docking this evening," the thin man grinned. He had a sharp face like the face of a ferret; his eyes were slitted, and Adam could not make out the color. "Mr. Phineas Ball, at your service," the thin man continued. "I represent Great Western Packet. Mr. Slade would like to see you in his office aboard the *Anthony Wayne*."

Adam coolly lighted the cigar. He said, "And who in hell is Mr. Slade, my friend?"

Phineas Ball's lower jaw sagged. He stared at Adam's face closely to see if he were joking, but Adam gave him a bland look.

"Mr. Morgan Slade, President of Great Western Packet Company," Ball said slowly. "He'd like to see you in his office, Captain McCall."

"I'll be in Battle City for twenty-four hours," Adam said. "I have time to see no one. You can tell Mr. Slade that."

Ball shoved his long hands in his trouser books and spread his thin legs on the long wharf. He said softly, "So that's your answer, Captain?"

"That's my answer," Adam told him, "and you can tell Mr. Slade that if he sends any of his toughs near my boat I'll go down and horse-whip him personally."

Phineas Ball sucked at his teeth noisily. He grinned, revealing a set of uneven, yellow teeth. He said, "I shall be delighted to take Mr. Slade that reply."

CHAPTER TWO

A Hobnailed Giant

ADAM walked past him, very definite now that he'd received his last ultimatum from Morgan Slade. From now on it would be a war to the finish. Slade had to subdue every river man on the Mis-

souri. If one man succeeded in bucking Slade others would flock to his standard; many of the discontented captains now working under the banner of Great Western would slip the harness and defy Slade to do his worst. All the way up from St. Louis Adam had had this thought in mind. He'd half-expected Slade to give him another chance after he'd peremptorily refused to talk with one of the combine representatives on the lower river.

Walking up the rutted road from the wharf, Adam studied the sprawling city before him. Battle City was one of the biggest towns on the river, north of St. Louis. It had had a population of five thousand the previous summer; he figured this to be nearly doubled now. Heavy draft vessels were bringing cargos up to Battle City for transshipment on lighter packets like his own for delivery up to the mouth of the Yellowstone, and up to Paradise. Miners headed for the Black Hills and the Montana goldfields were outfitting here instead of St. Louis, and the town buzzed with activity.

The main street blazed with light as he came up the slight hill from the wharf. Many of the buildings were still log huts, but numerous board buildings, some of them two stories high, were going up all over town.

The streets were crowded, milling throngs pushing in and out of the dozens of saloons and gambling houses. Adam headed straight for the big Missouri Belle saloon, headquarters for most of the business on the river.

He had four tons of grocery staples in the hold of the *Judy Greene,* destined for delivery in Battle City to Mr. Jonas Day, and he knew that Day, a prosperous merchant, would be shipping freight north to Paradise on the last boat out of Battle City.

A floorman was throwing a drunk out through the bat-wing doors of the Missouri Belle when Adam swung in off the boardwalk and up the three steps to the porch. Deftly, he caught the drunk with one arm, lowered him to the walk, and entered the saloon.

The floorman, Harry Barker, lifted a finger to Adam. He said, "Glad to see you, Captain. Just in?"

Adam nodded. "Jonas Day in the house?" he wanted to know.

"Back room," Barker said. He was rubbing his chin as Adam walked past him. He said, "We expect Logan Brynn in this establishment some time tonight, Adam."

Adam McCall pulled up, a thin smile on his face. He said, "That right, Harry?"

"Now," Barker went on, a frown on his wide face, "I never did like Brynn myself, Adam, and I wouldn't like to have it out with him if I could help it. You'll take my advice?"

"With pleasure," Adam said solemnly.

"Don't try to hurt that man with your fists," Harry Barker said seriously. "It can't be done."

"I'll remember it, Harry," Adam nodded. "We'll have a drink later in the evening." He passed through the crowd in the saloon, working his way around the card tables and past the jammed bar. A bartender waved to him and Adam cupped his hands to make himself heard above the racket. He said to the man, "*Judy Greene* leaves at noon tomorrow, Dave. We'll take passengers as far as Paradise."

A man turned and looked at him curiously. Dave, the bartender, gulped, grimaced, and then picked up his bar of soap to soap the announcement on the bar mirror.

As the words were scrawled across the big mirror a sudden silence descended along the bar. Cigar tight in his jaws, Adam passed through the door to the rear gambling room. He found Jonas Day, a fat, yellow-haired man sitting at one of the card tables.

Day spotted him coming through the door and got up immediately from his chair. He came forward, hand outstretched, a broad smile on his face.

"A sight for sore eyes, Captain McCall," the fat man chuckled. Taking Adam's arm he led him to an empty booth and called for drinks. He sat there, studying Adam's face, rubbing his chubby hands together. "So you made it, Captain," he said thoughtfully.

Adam moistened his lips. "Didn't you expect me to get up here?" he asked.

Day shrugged. "These are troublesome days on the river, Adam," he observed. "When can I unload?"

"You can send your wagons down to the wharf right now," Adam said, "or you can wait till morning, Jonas. We ship out at noon tomorrow."

"Down river?" Jonas Day asked softly.

"Up river," Adam said. "To Paradise."

The merchant frowned and looked down at his hands. "That's what I thought, Adam," he muttered. "I have twenty-five tons to go up to Paradise before winter sets in."

"I have room for it," Adam stated.

"Morgan Slade says you don't," Day smiled wryly. "Great Western gave out the news that the *Anthony Wayne* will be the last boat upriver this summer."

"I don't work for Great Western," Adam McCall said. "I think we can beat the *Anthony Wayne's* time to Paradise."

JONAS DAY poured two drinks from the bottle the waiter set before them. He said gravely, "Great Western has a strangle hold on the upper river, Adam. You've been down in St. Louis a long time. You don't know what's going on up here. Slade makes his own freight rates and his passenger fares, and they've jumped two hundred percent since last summer. Slade tells what captain to make what run."

"So he wants this last run for himself," Adam laughed mirthlessly. "He'll keep every other boat down river while he goes up to Paradise to make thirty or forty thousand dollars for himself. That last boat down from Paradise will bring back two hundred passengers and a half million dollars in gold dust, Jonas."

"I know it," Day nodded, "but Slade gave the order. There's no one in this town disobeying it—even the few boats he doesn't have in the combine."

"The *Judy Greene* leaves at noon tomorrow, Jonas," Adam McCall said smoothly. "I have room for your cargo, if you wish to ship."

Day stared at his glass thoughtfully. He said finally, "I'll put a night crew on right away, Adam. I like your kind of man." He held out his flabby hand, and Adam shook it. They got up and moved toward the door to the main bar room.

"You'll find Cannivan and Fred Baines on board," Adam said. "They'll take care of you, Jonas."

Jonas Day paused in the doorway. He said queerly, "I understand, Adam, somebody is supposed to take care of you this evening also." He was looking toward the bar, and Adam saw Logan Brynn standing there, his huge back toward them. Brynn had red hair and a thick, heavily corded neck. His ears also were thick, turned outward.

Brynn was looking up at the writing on the bar mirror, the announcement that the *Judy Greene* would ship out on the morrow. Brynn stood six feet, four inches, a tremendous figure of a man, weighing at least two hundred and fifty pounds.

Adam looked at his scarred face in the bar mirror, the battered nose, the thick, twisted lips, the scar tissue over the eyes, which were small, close-set, green in color.

"You ever meet Morgan Slade?" Jonas Day was saying softly.

"No," Adam admitted.

"Over behind that card table," Day said. "Tall man with the black beaver and the claw-hammer coat. Face like a damned ghost."

Adam McCall looked in the direction Day had indicated, and he looked into the blackest, handsomest eyes he'd ever seen in his life. Morgan Slade, lounging behind the card table, had been watching him as he came through the door. He had a ghost's face—good-looking, smooth-featured, well-shaped nose, the almost-womanish lips parted in a slight smile, but the color of the face was white, a sickening whiteness, the color of death, out of which his coal black eyes glittered like two gems.

Jonas Day said softly, "Trouble's brewing, Adam, my boy."

For the first time Adam noticed the strange silence in this big room, packed with men, misty with tobacco smoke. Even the card players at the tables along the wall were looking covertly up from their pasteboards, watching him, watching the gigantic Logan Brynn at the bar.

Brynn lifted his voice. It was a hoarse, guttural sound. He growled.

"Dave Bannon."

The bartender shuffled down from the other end of the bar, his face pale and clumsy. He slapped at the bar with a rag as he walked and he tried to appear unconcerned.

"Want a drink, Logan?" Bannon asked timidly.

Brynn lifted a ham-like hand toward the bar mirror. He said, "Wipe that off, Bannon."

The bartender's eyes shifted past Brynn to Adam McCall standing just inside the

doorway from the back room, less than a dozen feet from Brynn. Dave Bannon said,

"You want that off, Mr. McCall?"

Adam walked over to the bar, taking a position about four feet to Logan Brynn's right. He looked up at the soaped sign on the mirror. He said,

"We'll leave it where it is, Dave."

"And we'll take it the hell off," Logan Brynn said softly. "Ain't no boat but the *Anthony Wayne* leavin' for Paradise City tomorrow."

Adam turned around so that he faced the big man. He said, "Logan, I didn't know you'd started a shippers' organization, also."

Somebody laughed at the far end of the room, and the red came into Logan Brynn's massive face.

"Reckon I'm in with Great Western," the giant growled, "an' Great Western decided there ain't no boat but the *Anthony Wayne* leavin' for Paradise. You heard that?"

"To hell with Great Western," Adam said coolly, "and to hell with you, Brynn."

Harry Barker, Missouri Belle floorman, was standing at the far end of the bar, facing Adam. Logan Brynn's back was toward Barker. The bouncer had a large beer bottle in his hands, and he was leaning over the bar, caressing the bottle with both hands, watching Adam closely as if he were trying to catch his eye.

Logan Brynn said, "No man in this town can tell me to go to hell, McCall. I'll make you crawl in the dust up an' down Main Street for that." He straightened up at the bar and he spat on his tremendous, calloused hands.

At that instant Harry Barker slid the bottle up along fifteen feet of bar. The bottle knocked over a half-filled beer glass, shattering the glass, but the bottle itself was intact when it reached Adam McCall.

Scooping it up by the neck, Adam took one step forward and crashed the bottle across Brynn's skull. The big man's knees sagged, and blood poured over his eyes from the deep gash across his forehead. He didn't go down.

Adam stepped in and slammed his right fist into Brynn's stomach, knocking him back along the bar. He followed the giant, hitting savagely at his face with both hands, feeling pain in the hands as they came in contact with the big man's scarred face.

Brynn kept retreating along the bar, trying to wipe the blood out of his eyes and to protect his face from Adam's blows. He was mumbling under his breath and Adam caught some of the words.

"Now," Brynn was saying, "I'll be in this in a minute. I'll be in it, McCall."

As the giant reached the end of the bar where Harry Barker was standing just around the corner, the floorman stuck out his foot, tripping Brynn so that he crashed back against the wall with terrific force.

Adam leaped on top of him, slashing savagely at the ex-pugilist's face, but still Brynn did not go down. The giant braced himself against the wall, still mumbling, his face gashed and bleeding from half a dozen cuts.

Straightening up, he rammed his left hand into Adam's ribs, nearly caving them in. He came off the floor, half-blind, lunging forward, right hand cocked. He saw Adam vaguely and he shot the right hand for his face. The blow would have broken his jaw if it had landed.

ADAM ducked under the punch and backed away. He backed into a chair at one of the card tables. The floor had been cleared three seconds after Adam slashed at Brynn with the beer bottle. The crowd was backed up against the walls, standing on the stairway leading to the second floor. Percentage girls, scantily-clad, were watching, painted eyes glittering. There was little noise because this was not an ordinary fight. Brynn had already lost more blood than was lost in half a dozen rough and tumble encounters, and Brynn was far from finished.

Adam caught a brief glimpse of Morgan Slade standing near the stairway, a long, thin cigar in his mouth, hands in his pockets, the high beaver perched on the side of his head.

Then Brynn was coming in again, still trying to wipe blood out of his eyes, still mumbling. A terrible lump was appearing underneath his right eye, and the eye was closing rapidly.

He had the right hand cocked and he shot it in Adam's direction, missing by two feet because his vision was so bad. Adam picked up a chair and brought it down over Brynn's head and shoulders as the giant

lurched forward after missing the punch.

Brynn's right knee touched the floor as the chair splintered. He got up slowly, mouth open, breathing heavily. Adam still retained one leg of the chair and it formed an ideal cudgel, with a knob at one end. He moved forward with this in his hand and he hit Logan Brynn over the skull three times with it.

Brynn took a step in the direction of the bar. His legs gave way beneath him very suddenly. All the strength and the power left his big frame and he crashed to the floor, shaking the chandeliers overhead.

He lay there in an inert heap as George Smith, Missouri Belle owner, signalled two floormen to pick him up. Adam walked to the bar and stood there, rubbing his bruised knuckles gingerly, still feeling the effects of that single punch Brynn had landed on his ribs.

Harry Barker came up as they were hauling Brynn off the floor. Adam said to him,

"Much obliged, Harry. I owe you a drink."

Barker's brown eyes flickered in the direction of Morgan Slade. He said, "I'll take that drink, Adam, and then I think I'll get the hell out of this town. Battle City won't be healthy for me from now on."

"I could use another deck hand," Adam stated. "You might have a little trouble finding a boat to take you, Harry."

Barker smiled. He took the drink Adam pushed toward him, downed it, and said, "What are your orders, Captain?"

"Head for the *Judy Greene,*" Adam told him, "and stay aboard until we ship out. You might have a knife stuck in your ribs if you don't."

"Something to think about," Barker grinned. He turned and headed for the door.

Men were moving up to the bar again, and the placed hummed with excitement. Adam's sign on the bar mirror was still there. He looked at it wryly, and then he was conscious of a man stepping up at his left side, a tall man with a peculiar, whitish face.

"Drink with me, Captain McCall?" Morgan Slade said softly.

Adam turned around slowly and he was thinking of Ben Hallman, and many other upper Missouri rivermen who had been ruined by this black-eyed man with the pale face. He said tersely:

"After the hell you've caused on the river, Slade?"

Morgan Slade shrugged his thin shoulders. He was still smoking the long brown cigarette. A pulse was beating constantly in his left temple. He said, "You might be doing me an injustice, Captain McCall. I have the interests of the boat owners at heart."

"You won't be doing too badly yourself," Adam told him, "if you're able to get the *Anthony Wayne* up to Paradise and back without getting stuck on a bar for the winter."

Slade smiled. "As the organizer of the Great Western Packet Company I believe I'm entitled to some remuneration, Captain."

"I understand," Adam snapped, "that every boat owner in the combine must pay five hundred dollars on entering. Who gets that money?"

"They make it up," Slade said, "in higher rates and passenger fares."

"And they lose it," Adam told him grimly, "by having less to haul. Every shipper on the river is keeping his shipments down to a minimum because of these damnable rates. How much do *you* lose because of that?"

Morgan Slade poured himself a drink and held the glass up to the light. He said softly, "I could go a long way on the Missouri with a man as smart as yourself, Captain, working with me."

Adam smiled at him bitterly. "You're making me an offer?" he asked.

"You might call it that," Slade purred. "I'd think twice before turning it down. The Great Western Packet Company is pretty big now, Captain."

"The bigger the crash when it falls."

"You won't come in," Slade said, "even as an under-partner?"

"The next man from Great Western coming to me with an offer," Adam said slowly, "I'm throwing in the damned river, and I hope it's you, Slade."

Morgan Slade downed his drink and set the glass on the bar. He wasn't smiling now. He said, "Make sure, Captain, that you don't find *yourself* in the river, or under it." The pulse was beating faster in his temple as he walked away.

Adam watched him go, and then Dave Bannon, the bartender came over. Bannon said quietly,

"He's a bad one, Adam."

"I'm bad myself," Adam retorted.

"But you're not black," Bannon smiled. "That's the difference, Adam."

ADAM waited at the bar, waited for more shippers to come forward. They had goods to be shipped up to Paradise, and he knew it. He was charging far less to do it, but they were afraid to ship on his boat. Grimly, he went out into the night and walked back to the dock. He could see the *Judy Greene* as he came down the hill. Torches were burning now along the wharf as the roustabouts unloaded Jonas Day's cargo.

Two big freight wagons were also being unloaded with the cargo Day was shipping up to Paradise. The *Judy Greene*, newly painted, rocked gently at the wharf, two black smokestacks jutting up against the dark sky.

Ed Cannivan was directing the sweating men streaming back and forth across the planks. He nodded when Adam came up and he said,

"I heard it was good one."

"Harry Barker come aboard?" Adam asked him. "He did me a good turn."

"Down in the hold," Cannivan said. "He wanted to go right to work."

"He's a good man," Adam nodded. As he was walking across the plank Cannivan called after him,

"Adam, your lady passenger took a walk ashore."

Adam pulled up halfway across the plank. "Alone?" he asked. "Unescorted?"

"Said she had to do a little shopping of some kind," Cannivan told him. "I offered to send a man along with her, but she turned me down."

Adam heard the steps coming down the wharf, light steps on the rough board slabs, and a moment later Lucinda Blackwell emerged out of the night. She crossed the plank without hesitation, Adam standing aside at the other end. He touched his cap as she went by and he said,

"A very pleasant evening to you, Miss Blackwell."

He saw her face in the moonlight, pale, almost haggard.

"Yes, Captain," and she kept walking, going up the stairs to her cabin.

Adam heard a movement behind and below him. Turning, he saw Harry Barker just coming up the steps from the hold. Barker was stripped to the waist and his body was glistening with perspiration. He had a keg of molasses over his left shoulder and he set the keg down on the deck, mopping his face with a handkerchief. There was a queer expression on his wide face.

Adam said, "What's on your mind, Harry?"

"That girl shipping aboard this boat?" Barker asked him.

"She's going up to Paradise with us," Adam nodded. "Why?"

Barker shrugged. He looked at Adam steadily. "Nothing, except that I saw her going aboard the *Anthony Wayne* when I was coming down here from the saloon."

A deep frown settled on Adam McCall's face. "How are your eyes, Harry?" he asked. "You could have been mistaken."

"My eyes are good." Barker stated, "and I wouldn't forget a face like that, especially when it was less than twenty minutes since I saw it."

Adam didn't say anything for a long time. Barker came up from the hold and as he was walking by, Adam said, "You can keep that to yourself, Harry."

"You're the captain," Barker said.

Adam went to his cabin. He smoked his pipe for a long time before going to bed that night.

* * *

At ten o'clock the next morning Adam stood on the Texas deck and watched the *Anthony Wayne* backing out into the river. He saw Nathan Sears, the *Anthony* captain up in the pilot house, grinning at him. Morgan Slade sat in a chair on the Texas, enjoying the morning sunshine. He looked at the *Judy Greene* with little interest.

Adam watched the white smoke gushing from the twin stacks of the sleek river packet as she turned and headed up against the current. Ed Cannivan, standing nearby, said softly,

"Slade is carrying no passengers this trip, Adam. What does that mean?"

Adam shrugged. "Could mean a lot," he stated, "and it could mean no one wanted to pay his rates."

Cannivan laughed tersely. "Slade is smart enough to know that he can ruin you, Adam, if you don't reach Paradise this summer and come back with a full cargo and full passenger list. You're the only man fighting him on this river, and if you succeed in holding out he's through."

"So?" Adam asked.

"So Slade doesn't want any passengers aboard his boat to see what happens on this up-river trip," Cannivan grated. "He's not letting you reach Paradise, Adam."

"We'll see," Adam said. He saw Lucinda Blackwell's cabin door open and the girl come out into the sunlight. Her face was still pale, but she managed to smile when she saw him. Then she looked in the direction of the *Anthony Wayne* moving upriver, big sternwheel churning the muddy water. She steadied herself against the door jamb, lips tight. Then she came across the deck to where Adam was standing.

"Morning," Adam said. He tried not to think of Ben Hallman and the *Northern Star* which had burned down to the water; he tried not to think of a possible connection between this girl and Morgan Slade's diabolic scheme to control the upper Missouri.

"So there are two boats going up to Paradise?" Miss Blackwell said quietly.

Adam stared after the *Anthony Wayne*, eyes hard. "Hadn't you heard that?" he asked.

The girl looked at him quickly. "I wasn't sure," she said. "Shall we arrive before the *Anthony Wayne* or after?"

"Hard to say," Adam told her. "That's supposed to be the fastest boat on the river, but the *Judy Greene* has never been tested. It's nearly eleven hundred miles to Paradise City."

Ed Cannivan said, "We're loaded and ready to leave any time, Captain."

Adam nodded. He loaded his pipe and lighted it. He said, "We'll pull out on schedule, Ed. There might be a few passengers willing to go now that the *Anthony Wayne* is gone."

"We'll hope so," Cannivan said. He looked at the girl and he went below to the main deck.

At high noon the *Judy Greene* backed away from the wharf, gave one long blast on the whistle, and headed upriver after the *Anthony Wayne*. Immediately before going up to the pilot house Adam had gone below to the engine room for a talk with Tom Bolton, the engineer.

Bolton was moving around his precious engine room with an oiling can. His machinery was as slick and clean as it was possible to be. He had his fire banked, ready to bring up steam at a moment's notice.

Adam said to him, "Tom, you know every boat on this river. You know what they have below deck. How does the *Judy Greene* compare with the *Anthony Wayne?*"

Bolton rubbed a grimy hand across his lean face. He said, "You want to race the *Anthony Wayne* up to Paradise?"

"I'd like to get there before they do," Adam said. "Can we do it?"

Bolton grinned. "Engines are pretty much the same," he admitted. "Both fast boats in every way. This race will be decided up in the pilot house, Captain, and not down in the engine room."

Adam McCall nodded. As he was going out of the door, Bolton called after him, "I think we'll win, Captain."

CHAPTER THREE

Slade's Six-Pounder

ADAM stood behind the big wheel in the pilot house now as the *Judy Greene* moved past the row of packets lined along the Battle City docks. He watched the muddy current swirling down toward him and he smiled grimly. He knew this river —knew it the way a man knows the rooms in his house and can find his way around in the dark. He knew every mood of the Big Muddy; he had cataloged in his brain and in his log book every channel, every island, every sand bar from St. Louis to Paradise. And he knew them on the way back, also, when they looked entirely different.

Studying the high water mark along the rotting log wharf at Battle City, he could tell accurately how much water he would have between the Ram's Horn Islands which he would not reach until tomorrow night. It was this knowledge which had enabled him to take cut-offs other river pilots were afraid to chance for fear of

sticking on sand bars. He'd saved invaluable time for other river boat owners and he had his opportunity now to save time for himself.

The Missouri twisting down from its vast basin, moving through open plains and big sandy bluffs, was constantly changing its course as the swift current cut new channels for itself. These cut-offs oftentimes saved a river captain many hours during the high water season, but few pilots would risk going through many of them in midsummer during the dry season with the water low.

Approaching the Indian Pipe cut-off two hours out of Battle City Adam McCall calmly steered the packet in toward the shore. The mouth of the new passageway could be discerned less than a half mile away, sluggish water coming out of a cut between two high sand banks. The channel was less than forty yards wide, but it opened to eighty and a hundred yards beyond the mouth.

Ed Cannivan came into the pilot house as Adam was heading for the channel opening. Cannivan said, "Nathan Sears didn't go through there today, Adam."

"No," Adam smiled. "I believe we'll have three feet of water over that bar at the mouth of the channel. We'll pass the *Anthony Wayne* sometime after dark tonight if we take the cut-off now."

"Be hell to pay," Cannivan observed, "if you don't have those three feet; if you have only a foot."

Adam called for half-speed, and approached the bar cautiously. Adam held the bow directly into the current. He felt Ed Cannivan stiffen at his side, and then they were moving over the treacherous bar and there was no sound—no harsh grating, no tearing, grinding, as the *Judy Greene's* hull was ripped open.

"That's it," Adam said cheerily.

Cannivan took a deep breath. He was mopping his face with a handkerchief when he left the pilot room. Adam called after him,

"We'll be moving tonight until we pass the *Anthony Wayne*. I don't care how far Sears takes her before he stops."

"He won't go too far after dark," Cannivan muttered. "Only the devil and Captain McCall can navigate the Missouri without bearings."

They came out of the Indian Pipe cut-off at four o'clock in the afternoon and Adam could see the *Anthony Wayne's* smoke banner trailing across the sky to the north. He called for full speed from Tom Bolton and he felt the packet quiver as the engines began to throb with this new beat. They had deep water here and plenty of space to maneuver.

Going past Sioux Bluff, Adam kept in close to the shore to avoid the direct current out in mid-stream. He made his crossing at Ben Strickland's woodyard, the last woodyard until they reached Paradise. From now on they would have to depend upon isolated woodbanks along the river, or hustle for their own cordwood to keep the fires going.

At six o'clock in the evening with dusk falling on the river Adam threaded the maze of islands at the mouth of the Big Porky. He saw Lucinda Blackwell standing on the Texas deck below him, looking upriver. Her black hair was blowing in the evening breeze. He watched her thoughtfully for a long time until she was only a shadow in the darkness below.

Ed Cannivan came in and said, "The *Anthony Wayne* won't try to go through Snake Channel tonight, Adam. They'll be pulled up at King Point. You figure on passing them there?"

"That's right," Adam nodded.

"A fish," Cannivan growled, "would have a hell of a time navigating Snake Channel after dark. You're going through."

"I want to get past them," Adam explained, "and stay ahead all the way to Paradise. If Slade wants to start trouble he'll have to catch up with us to do it and I don't think he can."

"You get past him," Cannivan said, "and he'll figure something else out. There are more ways than one to skin a cat."

The King Point landing place was still three miles up river on the right bank, with the entrance to Snake Channel just beyond the cove. All river boats approaching the ten mile long Snake Channel near dusk usually pulled up at King Point, a natural landing point with a deep cove.

"Morgan Slade will be cursing Captain Sears' ears off," Cannival grinned, "when he sees the *Judy Greene* going past."

They swung around Georgia Bend, coming in sight of King Point, and Adam

caught a faint glimpse of red light from the cove. Cannivan said quietly,

"She's in there, Adam." He added, "She has her lights out. That flash came from the engine room, but the door is closed now. Why in hell is that?"

Adam McCall stared in the direction of the cove. He had to swing around King Point in order to enter the main opening to Snake Channel. There was another, smaller entrance farther across the river, but at night no pilot would risk a run through this rock-infested channel, and even in the day time practically all boats entered through the main pass near King Point.

"I don't like the looks of that," Cannivan said slowly. "Why should a boat douse all its lights at this hour?"

"We'll find out soon enough," Adam said. "Get below and put out all your lights, Ed. See that all cabin doors are closed."

"They'll still see us," Cannivan told him. "I wish we'd have painted this boat black instead of white."

The mate went below and Adam kept out in mid-stream, still watching the cove and the spot where he'd seen the red glow. The cove was tree-lined and even in the day time it was difficult to see a boat anchored there. He thought he saw a faint shadow at the mouth of the cove, something which protruded out into the river, and it could have been the dark bow of a river packet.

ADAM stared at this shadow grimly. If it was the *Anthony Wayne* it meant that Captain Sears had not tied the packet back in the usual anchoring place farther back in the cove, but had it out at the entrance for some strange reason.

The *Judy Greene* was still plowing upriver out in midstream, and it was time now to swing in toward the King Point cove and feel their way at half speed into the channel.

On an impulse Adam McCall suddenly swung the wheel the opposite way and turned the packet toward the far shore and the smaller opening to the channel.

Ed Cannivan was moving across the Texas deck below, calling to Harry Barker, when the new course became apparent. Adam saw the mate's white face looking up toward him, and then Cannivan bounced up the stairs to the pilot house, coming through the door with a rush.

He came up behind Adam and he stood there, breathing heavily, as the *Judy Greene* moved away from King Point and approached the small rocky opening to Snake Channel.

"You like your boat, Adam?" the mate asked finally.

"I want to keep it," Adam said. He rang for half-speed now and he kept his eyes glued on the dark opening. This smaller channel was thirty-five yards wide with a heavily-timbered island on the right. The big rocks lay along the main shoreline, jutting out into the channel. Two skeletons of river packets lay on these rocks, their bottoms torn out when the tricky current here had caught them and shoved them on the ledges.

They were directly opposite King Point cove, and a hundred yards from the channel opening when Adam saw the flash of orange light from the cove. He heard Cannivan's quick yell, followed immediately by the dull boom of a small cannon. There was a splash in the water less than ten yards from the surging hull of the *Judy Greene,* and then half a dozen smaller splashes moving toward the shoreline as a cannon ball skittered across the river.

"A six pounder!" Ed Cannivan yelled. "Damn him, he has a cannon aboard Adam!"

Grimly, Adam kept his eyes on the channel opening and the nose of the *Judy Greene* pointed on a tall pine on the edge of the island. He'd used this landmark before in steering his way through this channel in high water.

"He wanted to sink us," Cannivan grated. "He had that cannon trained on us all the time. If we'd have gone through the main opening we'd be going down now, Adam, with a hole in our hull below the water line."

"They'll try another shot," Adam said, "before we get into the channel. It's a quarter of a mile from the cove, but they came pretty close with that last one."

"He knows we have a woman aboard," Cannivan said tersely. "He won't stop at anything."

Adam McCall moistened his lips. "Yes," he said, "he knows we have a woman aboard."

The six-pounder on the deck of the *Anthony Wayne* banged again, but this time the ball whistled over the stern of the *Judy Greene,* splashing in the water near the shore.

"At close range," Cannivan muttered, "they never would have missed, Adam. We'd be sitting out there like a duck on the water."

Adam rang his bell to stop his engines. The *Judy Greene* drifted in toward the island, and Adam cut in around the point. He rang for half-speed again as the current caught them, and the big sternwheel started to revolve, stopping the drift toward the rocks. Adam pointed the bow up along the shore of the island.

There was a tricky little bend around which he had to maneuver, and then they were out in the main channel, following the tortuous windings upriver.

Ed Cannivan stood at Adam's elbow, saying nothing. He caught his breath once as Adam took the packet between the tiny Castor and Pollux Islands. White paint was scraped from the *Judy Greene's* starboard, but they went through, the tree boughs loosening one of the packet's grasshopper spars.

At midnight they were out of Snake Channel and in clear water again. Adam turned in toward the shore, pulling up in the shadows beneath Tomahawk Mountain.

Adam lighted his pipe and sat down on the bench in the pilot house, smoking, feeling the tension go out of his body. He had no doubt now that Morgan Slade would do everything in his power to wreck the *Judy Greene,* thus proving to every riverman on the Missouri that it did not pay to buck the Great Western Packet Company. The cannon shots had been warning signals that the fight was on.

Lighting a lantern, Adam picked up his chart book and went through it carefully. The book was old and well-worn, jammed with notes and drawings, sketchings of the Missouri River. Every channel, every landmark, sand bars, rocks, islands of every description from St. Louis to Paradise City were listed. He'd compiled the book during the years he'd been working as free-lance river pilot.

He went over carefully that part of the river between King Point cove and the narrow passageway between the Rams' Horn Islands which he would have to navigate on the morrow. The Missouri ran due north from King Point through the Snake Channel; then unaccountably it swerved to the northeast, cut around Grand Junction, and ran due west, forming a terrific elbow. It was possible to walk by foot overland from King Point cove to Rams' Horn Islands in three hours whereas a river packet took nine hours to move the same distance, following the tortuous course of the river.

Adam stared at that short strip of land forming the elbow. He was through Snake Channel himself now, and less than fifteen miles from Rams' Horn Islands. He realized now that he had made a mistake and that he should have gone beyond the Islands before pulling in for the night.

Closing the book, he walked over to the mouthpiece on the wall and got the engine room. He said, "Tom?"

Tom Bolton's voice came back, "Yes, Captain?"

"You bank your fire yet, Tom?" Adam asked him.

TOPS FOR QUALITY

BIGGER AND BETTER

"I have steam in the boilers," Bolton told him.

"I want to pull out," Adam said, "and get past Rams' Horn Islands tonight. Keep that fire up."

Bolton said worriedly, "Afraid we won't move any more tonight, Captain."

"Why not?" Adam asked quickly.

"Piston loosened up," Bolton said. "I have five or six hours work here, Captain. Figured I'd have it ready by morning."

Adam scowled into the mouthpiece. He said, "All right, Tom. We'll stay here." He put the book away, hoping he'd been wrong in his guess. He found Ed Cannivan down on the Texas deck and he said,

"Ed, you remember what happened to the *Thomas Daye* up in the Hat Island Channel?"

Cannivan stared at him. "She lost both her stacks," he said, "when she ran into a manila rope tied across the Channel—put there no doubt by Great Western."

Adam nodded. "What's to prevent Slade from crossing the elbow from King Point Cove to Rams' Horn Islands and doing the same thing to us?"

Cannivan scowled. "He could do it," he said. "We'd better get the hell through that passageway, Adam, before Slade thinks of it."

"We're here till morning," Adam said grimly. "We're having a little trouble down in the engine room."

Ed Cannivan shook his head. He glanced toward Lucinda Blackwell's cabin. He said quietly. "You remember what Ben Hallman said, Adam?"

Adam smiled. "It's only a thought," he admitted. "Slade might think he can catch up with us any time he wants to."

"Slade never left many loopholes before," Cannivan stated. "He's pretty shrewd."

ADAM slept for three hours. He was up a little past four o'clock. He had his coffee and he went down to the engine room. Tom Bolton and three weary helpers were just finishing up.

"We can leave in an hour," Bolton said. "Sorry that had to happen, Captain."

"No fault of yours," Adam smiled. "Better get some sleep after we get under way, Tom. I'll put another man down here to watch your fire."

The sun was coming up when Ed Cannivan ordered the lines slipped. Adam stood in the pilot house, looking upriver. He backed away from the shore slowly and then called for full speed out in the middle of the river. It was another warm, sluggish day and he noticed carefully the water marks along the shore. Each day in this heat of late summer the river was falling, making it more and more difficult to navigate. He had no doubt that before he reached Paradise he'd have to resort to his spars time and time again to get over the low sandbars.

As they approached Rams' Horn Islands, Ed Cannivan came up into the pilot house. The river was wide here, but the two Islands sprawled in the muddy water nearly filled the river, with the channel between the Islands less than a hundred feet wide.

Cannivan stared intently at the Islands. He said finally, a note of jubilance in his voice, "The air looks clear between the Islands, Adam. I don't think Slade stretched that rope."

Adam called for half-speed and he leaned forward a little, staring at the empty space between the Islands. They would have low water here, but he was positive there would be enough to get him through the channel without any difficulty. Cannivan was right that there was no rope stretched across the channel.

Very cautiously, Adam approached the opening to the channel. There was a rock ledge on the left Island and a few scattered rocks on the right, with the passageway directly in the center.

Cannivan said, "Once we get beyond Rams' Horn Islands, Adam, we'll make time. Slade won't catch us for another week, if at all."

It came then with startling suddenness. There was a peculiar rasping sound up at the bow of the *Judy Greene*. The packet, moving slowly, came to a stop as if held there by invisible strings. Adam was knocked up against the wheel, and Ed Cannivan slammed against the wall near one of the pilot house windows.

Down below on the main deck three deck hands were bowled over, and Harry Barker, coming up the stairway from the main deck to the Texas, was knocked off the steps, landing on his back in mute surprise.

A rifle ball passed through the open window of the pilot house, smashing into

the wall on the other side, missing Adam's head by inches. Several more guns cracked, the bullets spattering into the walls of the pilot house which were sheathed with boiler iron as protection against possible Indian attacks. The bullets were coming from points on both islands, from behind rude log barricades which Adam could see now half-hidden among the trees.

He saw something else as he yanked his bell cord for reverse and steadied the big wheel. On either shore heavy iron chains had started to lift out of the water as the *Judy Greene* surged against the main section of chain which had been thrown across the narrow channel and which was concealed under water.

Ed Cannivan righted himself, stared out the window, and yelled, "A chain, Adam! They've run a chain across the river!"

More rifle balls were banging into the pilot house, and then one of the windows was shattered, the glass cutting Adam's face in several places. He crouched down low and he kept his hands on the spokes of the wheel, steadying the boat out in mid-channel.

The big paddle wheel was in reverse now, backing away from the chain, and he heard the triumphant shouts from the shores. Ed Cannivan tumbled out of the pilot house. cursing, and Adam saw him running across the Texas, yelling for Harry Barker to break open the munitions box and get out the rifles

Carefully, Adam backed away from the chain until he was fifty yards from the shore. He made his turn then and headed downstream again just as the first shots came from the *Judy Greene* in answer to the firing from the shore.

He straightened up then, a chill in his heart, grasping fully Morgan Slade's plan. Very deliberately, Slade intended to sink the *Judy Greene*. He'd cut off her passage-way north to Paradise City, and she could not go back because the *Anthony Wayne*, with a six pounder or two aboard, was lying in wait at King Point cove, ready to sally out and sink her as she came out of Snake Channel.

And he couldn't stay where he was because Slade would undoubtedly be coming up river in a day or two to search him out and sink him no matter where he was. There was the possibility Slade was already coming up Snake Channel now to ferret him out, but he didn't think so. He'd seen Morgan Slade's face in the *Missouri Belle* saloon when Logan Brynn was getting ready to work. Slade liked to see a man suffer, to sweat, and Slade would find more enjoyment simply waiting in King Point cove for him to come out.

The *Judy Greene* swept around a bend, and Adam pulled in two miles downstream. He rang his landing bells and he watched the grim-faced Ed Cannivan below having the hawser lines cast ashore.

Lucinda Blackwell came out of her cabin and looked up toward the pilot house. She was white-faced, trembling. Adam went down on the main deck. He said to Cannivan,

"Put a few men ashore. There's a possibility Slade's crew might come down here from the Islands and try to sink us."

Cannivan nodded. "So Slade did work last night," he muttered. "What happens now, Adam? We sit here and wait till the *Anthony Wayne* comes upriver to sink us?"

"We'll have to think about that," Adam stated quietly. "Either we have to sink Slade's boat, or he'll sink us. He's fired on us twice, and there's no law upriver to appeal to."

"Sink him?" Cannivan half-smiled. "We don't carry a cannon, Adam." He added, "If we try to ram him, we'll both go down, and we don't want that."

"No." Adam agreed. "I don't want to lose the *Judy Greene.*" He walked up to the bow and leaned over, looking down at the hull. He said to Cannivan. "Get me the boat's carpenter, Ed."

Ed Cannivan called to a man who was rubbing his knees ruefully where they had come in contact with the deck when the *Judy Greene* rammed the chain. The man came over, a big, red-headed fellow by the name of Rufe Haines.

Adam said to him, "Rufe, how long would it take you to rig up one of our spars to this hull so that it pointed straight ahead of us with the point just below the water line?"

THE CARPENTER stared at him, looked at the open-mouthed Ed Cannivan, and then got down on his knees to look over the edge of the bow. He examined

the grasshopper spar on the port side of the boat and then he said,

"Half a day, Captain."

"I want that spar shaved to a point," Adam said calmly, "and I want the point sheathed with boiler iron. You'll find some in the engine room, Rufe."

The carpenter blinked. "You—you goin' to ram somethin', Captain?" he asked finally.

"That's right," Adam said. "I want that spar fastened as tight as you can make it, Rufe. Brace it with heavy timbers. Pick your crew and get going right away."

Rufe Haines shuffled away for his tools and Adam sat down on one of the capstans. He said to Cannivan,

"You know how deep King Point cove is, Ed?"

"No," Cannivan said, mystified.

"Thirty-five feet," Adam told him, "where the *Anthony Wayne* is tied."

Ed Cannivan took a deep breath. "You figure on going down there and sinking her?" he asked. "That cannon will blow us to hell before we get within fifty yards of her, Adam."

"Not if they don't see us coming," Adam said. "Slade will be looking for us to attempt to run through the small opening to Snake Channel through which we came, because that's farthest from the cove. We won't be going out that way, Ed. We're drifting down the main channel and swinging right into King Point cove. We'll be on top of them before they know it."

"That iron-tipped spar will tear right through the *Anthony Wayne's* ribs," Cannivan admitted, "but we'll keep going and smash our own hull, Adam."

Adam shook his head. "When Haines finishes installing that spar, I want you to go down into the hold and pick out anything you can use as batting—cotton bales, roping, any kind of cotton goods, a few mattresses. Lash them to the hull so that if we do ram them we'll have a cushion."

Ed Cannivan was grinning broadly now. "I think, Captain," he chuckled, "you have something now."

Adam watched Rufe Haines lining up his crew of helpers, hauling timbers out of the hold, disengaging the spar on the port side of the boat. He heard a light step, and then he saw Lucinda Blackwell approaching. She watched the men bringing the timbers up to the hull, and then she said,

"Do you really think Mr. Slade wants to sink your boat, Captain?"

Adam's gray eyes narrowed. "I think so," he said. "Do you know Mr. Slade?"

"I've met him." the girl admitted.

"Do you know what he's trying to do on the Missouri?" Adam asked her grimly.

"I have an idea," Lucinda Blackwell said slowly, and again Adam saw that vague terror creeping into her eyes. She had something to say, and he knew it, but she wouldn't open up. She said, "Do you think we'll reach Paradise, Captain?"

"I'll know in the morning," Adam told her. He didn't give her any information; he let her form her own opinions concerning the spar Rufe Haines was setting into the *Judy Greene's* hull. He saw her sitting on the Texas deck later in the afternoon, watching the work.

The river was calm with no life on it. Adam sent reconnoitering parties up and down the river to make sure that no one was spying on them, watching the progress of the work. The other shore was too far away for anyone to gauge accurately what the hammering was about. He accompanied one party himself, and he sent Cannivan out with five crew members, making up the second party.

Struggling through the underbrush along the water's edge, swatting at mosquitoes and flies, Adam spent fully an hour before deciding to come back to the boat. He was drenched with perspiration and wet from the waist down from slipping into bogs. The return journey was better in that they knew the shoreline better and were able to circumvent the bad spots.

They were within a hundred yards of the boat, and they could hear the hammering, when a man on board suddenly howled, "Fire!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Die, River-Hog, Die!

THE FIRE bell started to clang fitfully a moment later. Adam was just scrambling up an embankment when he heard the dread word. The *Judy Greene* was hidden among the tall trees which grew right down to the water's edge.

A cold sweat breaking out on his face,

Adam hurtled across a ten foot wide creek and scrambled up another embankment. He tore through the timber, leaving the crew members far behind him. He heard Ed Cannivan's yell, and then he saw Cannivan and his men plunging toward the spot where the planks had been set ashore.

Adam saw the smoke then, pouring out of one of the cabin doors, Lucinda Blackwell's cabin. A bucket brigade had been formed by Harry Barker who was trying to fight his way inside the cabin with an axe.

Sprinting across the planks, Adam piled up the stairs to the Texas deck. Harry Barker was inside the cabin when he reached the door.

"Watch it!" Barker yelled.

A moment later a mass of burning blankets and bedclothes tumbled out through the door. Adam snatched up one of the water buckets and plunged into the room as the burning mass was hastily pitched overboard. One wall of the cabin was in flames, but half a dozen buckets of water quickly quenched the fire.

Adam looked at the sweating, black-faced Barker. He said quietly, "Kind of glad I ran into you back in Battle City, Harry."

"We caught it in time," Barker admitted. "Another five minutes and those flames would have been through that wall. There would have been no stopping it then."

"Where is she?" Adam said coldly. He felt a hammer beating inside of him; he was thinking of Ben Hallman and the *Northern Star*.

"Miss Blackwell?" Barker asked. "Reckon you'll find her outside, Captain. She—"

Adam waited to hear no more. Stepping out on the deck he looked around for the girl, and found her standing near the Texas deck railing, a water bucket in her hands. Her hair was disheveled; her eyes were watering from the smoke. Adam said stiffly,

"Miss Blackwell, I'd like to see you in my cabin."

He started to walk away, face as hard as iron, and then Harry Barker touched his arm. The ex-floorman said quietly.

"Hope there's no mistake, Captain. Miss Blackwell discovered that fire, and if she hadn't given the alarm you'd have had no boat."

Adam's mouth opened. "She gave the alarm?" he muttered. "Then who—?"

"One of your crew, Luke Briggs, skipped the boat right after the fire started," Barker said. "I saw him running across the plank. Miss Blackwell spotted him coming out of her cabin and then she found the fire. I'd say Morgan Slade gave Briggs a big piece of money for trying to burn us out, Captain."

"Briggs," Adam said slowly. He remembered signing the man on back in St. Louis. He hadn't known anything about Briggs' background, but he'd seemed like an experienced deck hand, Turning to Lucinda Blackwell, waiting nearby, Adam said quietly, "I'm sorry, Miss Blackwell. I'm afraid I made a mistake."

"I should still like to talk to you, Captain," the girl told him. "I have something to tell you."

Adam's eyes flickered. He nodded and led the way to his cabin. After closing the door behind them, he lighted his pipe and waited. Lucinda Blackwell sat down on one of his trunks. She said without emotion,

"You have suspected me for a long time, haven't you, Captain?"

Adam puffed on the pipe in embarrassment. "A woman is always a problem on board a riverboat," he said.

"I was a particular problem. I could see that in your eyes. Why were you worried about me?"

Adam McCall took the pipe from his mouth. "Ben Hallman of the *Northern Star* thought you were bad luck," he said. "Both boats on which you came up river foundered."

"What else?" Lucinda asked him.

"You were seen going on Morgan Slade's boat the night before we pulled out of Battle City," Adam said, "and Slade is now trying to sink the *Judy Greene*."

"I—I know Mr. Slade," the girl said slowly.

"You don't work for him?" Adam asked.

She hesitated and then she said. "I have never done anything for Mr. Slade."

Adam looked at his pipe. "You'd better start from the beginning," he suggested. "We're running around in circles."

Lucinda Blackwell closed her eyes and then opened them. "I have a younger brother up in Paradise," she said finally,

speaking in a low voice. "He was a member of Morgan Slade's organization. He was young and Mr. Slade talked him into it."

Adam nodded. "One of hundreds of young men stranded up in Paradise City when their money gave out and they hadn't struck it rich."

"He wrote me," the girl said, "that he'd been doing a lot of drinking, and that in the beginning he thought the Great Western Packet Company was a good thing for the river. Later, he learned that Slade was a devil. My brother Jack was with a group of ruffians who assaulted Captain Hendrick Samuels, owner of the *Anthony Wayne*. Jack was drunk that night and he thought Samuels was fighting against the combine, trying to wreck it."

Adam nodded. "Samuels disappeared," he said, "and Morgan Slade took over his boat."

"CAPTAIN Samuels was murdered," Lucinda Blackwell told him slowly, "and his body thrown into the river. Jack learned that later. He was too drunk to know what had happened that night along the Paradise City wharf. Slade told him that later when he wanted to get out of the organization and return home."

"And Slade held that over his head like a whip," Adam said tersely, "threatening to turn him over to the authorities on a murder charge. Slade could have procured witnesses to prove that your brother was the real murderer, and at the same time prove that his own hands were clean."

"You—you know?" the girl asked, puzzled.

"It's not a new story," Adam smiled bitterly. "What happened to your brother?"

"Mr. Slade heard that I was coming up to Paradise to see him and possibly help him," Lucinda said. "They must have been intercepting Jack's mail. One of Slade's representatives met me in St. Louis and made me an offer. They gave me the whole story as it was."

"What did they want of you?" Adam asked, mystified.

"Morgan Slade was having trouble with several boat owners, Captain Hallman, Captain Lane, yourself, several others. He wanted to harass them as much as possible. It was suggested that I take passage from St. Louis on one of their boats with the intention of starting a fire in my cabin some night and causing them a little trouble."

"A little trouble!" Adam echoed. "Didn't you know that practically every fire on board a river packet is fatal unless it's discovered quickly?"

"I didn't know that at the time," the girl whispered.

"You—you burned down the *Northern Star*," Adam McCall said slowly.

"No," the girl shook her head. "Slade told me that if I didn't cooperate with him he'd have young Jack hanged the day I reached Paradise. He thought that a woman wouldn't be watched too closely on board ship, and that I could do things that a man couldn't. I didn't start that fire on the *Northern Star*. I couldn't bring myself to do it. I believe the combine bribed a crew member the same as in this case."

"What about the *General Fremonte?*" Adam asked, "the packet on which you originally took passage from St. Louis, and which hit a rock near Camp Stambaugh."

"I believe Captain Lane's pilot was given a large sum of money to wreck the *General Fremonte*," Lucinda Blackwell said, "if I didn't do anything myself. Slade wasn't sure of me. I told them I wanted to think about it."

"You went to see Slade in Battle City," Adam said. "What happened?"

"I tried to beg him to let me take Jack home with me. I wanted to pay him ten thousand dollars, every penny my father had. He laughed at me. He told me I had my last chance to fire the *Judy Greene*, and if I didn't Jack would die."

"Then he bribed my crew man, Briggs," Adam scowled, "just in case you failed to act." He said, "Your brother still up in Paradise?"

"I haven't heard from him all summer," Lucinda said worriedly. "I believe they're preventing him from writing."

Adam walked to the door and opened it. He called. "Harry Barker." When Barker came over he said, "Harry, you hear all the news in the *Missouri Belle*. Ever hear any of the miners from Paradise speak of young Jack Blackwell?"

"Blackwell," Barker murmured. "Why now that I think of it, Captain, a crew man from the packet *Far West* told me he'd heard this story going around up in

Paradise City. Young fellow by the name of Blackwell was found in his hotel room with a bullet in his head. Looked like he'd killed himself. The gun was in his hand."

Adam McCall heard the soft cry behind him. Turning in the doorway, he saw Lucinda Blackwell with her head in her hands, shoulders shaking. Harry Barker said slowly,

"Reckon I shouldn't have said that, Captain. I didn't know they were related."

"All right, Harry," Adam said. Barker walked away and Adam watched the girl. She was sobbing softly. He said, "Can I do anything, Miss Blackwell?" He knew that he couldn't—that she wanted to be alone. He went out when she didn't answer. He closed the door behind him.

The hammers were going again up in the bow and he noticed that the carpenter had the heavy spar in position on the framework and that they were reinforcing it.

Ed Cannivan, smoking a cigar, watched Adam closely. He said softly, "Well?"

Briefly, Adam gave him the story, and he saw the hardness come into the mate's eyes.

"The dirty dog," Cannivan grated when he'd finished. "He knew young Blackwell was dead, but he was still holding that threat over the girl's head."

Adam nodded. "We'll see Morgan Slade tonight," he said quietly. "Get that batting placed around the hull. We'll move down river a little after midnight."

"That should bring us to King Point cove about two or three o'clock in the morning," Cannivan said. "You figure on drifting down through Snake Channel without any power?"

"That's right," Adam said. "They'd hear us coming with the engines working. They'd shoot us right out of the water."

"Damned tricky business in that channel," Cannivan observed, "with the wheel dead." He added as an afterthought, "And at night."

Adam stared across the river. "Break out the guns," he said. "Have every crew man armed and ready to board the *Anthony Wayne* when we hit her. We're going aboard."

"A pleasure," Cannivan grinned. "Our boys didn't like those shots from the shore, Adam, especially when we weren't ready for them."

A PALE moon illuminated the river at five minutes past midnight when Adam had the ropes slipped and the *Judy Greene* backed out into midstream. The long iron-tipped spar rigged to the bow of the packet cut through the water with an ominous swish.

Adam spoke to engineer Tom Bolton through the speaking tube. He said, "Tom, we're cutting our engines after we reach Snake Channel. I'll give you the bell."

"Aye, sir," Bolton answered.

Down below on the main deck Adam watched Ed Cannivan talking to the huddled group of men. He saw the guns being passed out. Then he heard the pilot house door open behind him and a light step on the floor. Lucinda Blackwell said quietly,

"May I come in, Captain?"

"All right," Adam said. He watched the river and the dark banks on either side. He kept the *Judy Greene* in the shadows along the right bank.

"You're going down to fight Slade," the girl said slowly.

"Rather than wait for him to come up here and sink us," Adam said. "He brought those cannon with him just for that purpose."

"He'll still have the river blocked even if you do sink the *Anthony Wayne*," Miss Blackwell pointed out. "You can't get past that chain."

"Once we're safe from attack in the rear," Adam stated, "I'll work something out regarding that chain. We might land our entire crew and raid their fortification. I can't do that now with the possibility that Slade might come up river any moment."

"Would it be very terrible for you," Lucinda asked, "if Mr. Slade sank your ship?"

Adam laughed shortly. "I'd be in debt the rest of my life," he admitted. "I've spent ten years saving up money to buy this boat and I had to get out a big mortgage to put her in condition."

"You wouldn't sign up with Great Western?" the girl asked.

Adam smiled grimly. "The Big Muddy is a free river," he stated, "and the men who sail it should be free, also. I'll fight Slade if I'm the last free boat on the river."

They were approaching the entrance to

Snake Channel now, and Adam picked up the speaking tube. He said,

"Shut her off, Tom."

The throbbing of the engines stopped, and the packet moved with the current, heading into the narrow island-infested Channel. The *Judy Greene* drifted silently, huge sternwheel motionless. Adam kept her bow steady, hoping the drift wouldn't be too strong and push him on the rocks or into a sandbar. He said to the girl,

"You'll be better off down in your cabin. When you hear my whistle lie down on the floor and brace yourself. There'll be a shock." As she turned to go he said quietly. "I'm sorry about your brother."

She was silent at the door and then she said, "I suppose it's better this way, Captain. You've been very kind."

Adam heard the door close behind her. He concentrated now on the river, steadying himself behind the wheel as they approached the worst section of the long channel. The *Judy Greene* drifted downstream like a giant bird, sitting motionless on the water. All lights had been extinguished.

Ed Cannivan came in and said, "We're all ready, Adam. Let's hope now that Slade doesn't have his six-pounder trained on this channel opening when we come through."

"I don't think he will," Adam said. "Every man makes one mistake, and Slade has still to make his."

They were halfway through the ten mile long Channel when Cannivan went below again to take charge of the boarding party. Alone up in the pilot house Adam watched the moonlit river and he was thinking of Lucinda Blackwell, her long trip from the east to St. Louis, and then up to Paradise City on a futile, heart-rending quest. He assumed she would be going home when they returned to Battle City again.

Nearing the mouth of the channel Adam began to feel the tension. They passed the head of the island where the second, smaller opening ended, and they had another half mile to go. In his mind's eye Adam pictured King Point cove and the exact position of the *Anthony Wayne*. The packet had been anchored at the mouth of the cove, and as he came out of the channel opening he had to swing around a bend and into the cove. He would be approximately fifty yards from the *Anthony Wayne* before he came into view; he had to hope that he could cover those fifty yards before he was sighted and the six-pounders were manned.

Picking up the speaking tube again, he said, "Tom, I'll want full speed as soon as I come out of the Channel. I don't want to ring a bell. Stay near the tube."

"Aye, sir," the engineer said.

They had two hundred yards to go, and then a hundred. The Channel was very tricky here, and Adam several times had to stop the drift toward the right bank. He was breathing faster now and the sweat broke out on his face. He had a picture in his mind of the *Judy Greene,* several cannon balls through her hull below the water line, water pouring into her hold, dragging the fast packet to the river bottom.

He had a Colt sixgun inside his coat which Cannivan had given him the last trip up to the pilot house. He lowered his windows now and loosened the gun in his belt. If the ensuing shock jammed his door he could still go through the window and join the boarding party.

Cool night air blew into the pilot house, drying the sweat on his face. He saw Ed Cannivan's face turned toward him, and then Cannivan lifted a hand, signifying that they were ready below. He saw the dark shapes crouching on the main deck up near the bow.

Ten seconds before they swung out of the channel he had the horrible feeling that Morgan Slade might have shifted the *Anthony Wayne,* and that it was now on the other side of the river, watching both openings, ready to move out and intercept him when he appeared.

Then he saw the twin smoke stacks looming up above the tops of the trees. The packet was still in the cove. He picked up the speaking tube calmly and he said,

"All right, Tom."

They were in King Point Cove and in plain sight of the *Anthony Wayne* lying motionless on the other side of the little inlet, when the *Judy Greene's* engines began to throb. Adam McCall felt the packet quiver. Behind him the big sternwheel dug into the water.

In the moonlight he saw a guard sitting up on the Texas deck of the *Anthony Wayne,* a rifle across his knees, his chair

tilted back against the wall of the cabins.

The *Judy Greene* covered ten of the fifty yards as the guard stared at them, stupefied. The sound of the packet's engines attracted several men from the saloon. They burst through the doors out onto the deck, and when they saw the *Judy Greene* bearing directly toward them at full speed, several of them started to yell frantically.

Adam reached up and grasped his whistle cord. He began to pull it steadily, and the terrific blast filled the night with sound. It was nervewracking, piercing the ear drums, which was exactly what he wanted it to do.

The dumbfounded men on board the *Anthony Wayne* yelled at each other and scattered in different directions. Nathan Sears, captain, tore out of his cabin, howling for some of them to man the two guns.

Adam saw the two brass six-pounders gleaming in the moonlight on the main deck up in the bow. They were tweny-five and then twenty yards from the other boat, picking up more speed all the time.

Bracing himself, Adam gave several disconcerting blasts on the whistle and waited for the shock. It came a moment later. There was a rending, rasping sound as the steel-tipped spar tore through the hull of the *Anthony Wayne* twenty feet down along the starboard side.

Then the main shock came as the *Judy Greene's* hull, heavily padded, smashed into the side of the *Anthony Wayne*. One of the *Wayne's* stacks crashed, falling into the timber on the shore; the other stack tottered and threatened to go down any moment.

Big sternwheel still digging into the water, the *Judy Greene* pushed the *Anthony Wayne* back up aginst the wall of the cove. Crewmen on board the *Anthony Wayne* were tumbling in all directions as their boat staggered from the shock.

ADAM had been thrown against the wheel and he heard it crack. Recovering himself, he snatched the sixgun from his belt and tumbled through the window. Down below him Ed Cannivan was yelling, urging the men after him, as he clambered over the side and onto the deck of the *Anthony Wayne*. The two boats were now locked, and Adam saw several ropes being thrown across and lashed around the capstans on the *Anthony Wayne,* tying the boats so that they would not drift apart.

Guns were banging as Adam tore down the short flight of steps to the Texas, and then down the grand staircase to the main deck. Tumbling across the intervening space betwen the two boats—space made by the batting—he heard water gurgling and rushing into the hold of the *Anthony Wayne*.

From the Texas deck of the crippled ship crew hands were firing fitfully. Ed Cannivan led a party up the staircase, and as they came on Slade's men retreated aft.

Adam scrambled up over a huge pile of cordwood on the main deck, firing as he ran. The huge figure of Logan Brynn appeared suddenly in front of him, looming up on the other side of the pile. Brynn had a gun in his hand and he snapped it almost in Adam's face.

The hammer of Brynn's gun clicked on a defective shell. Adam fired one shot into the man's broad chest as Brynn desperately lined his gun for a second shot.

Brynn threw up his huge arms and fell

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backward, a forty-five calibre slug through his chest. A man raced out of the engine room up ahead and leaped over the side into the water.

A slug whistled past Adam's head as he raced for another stair case in the bow which led up to the Texas. Looking up, he saw Morgan Slade staring down at him from the Texas, gun in hand, smoke curling from the muzzle.

They were twenty-five feet apart when Adam lunged for the protection of another cordwood pile nearby. Slade's second shot clipped Adam's shoulder. Whirling, Adam was leveling his gun when he heard the heavy bang of one of the six-pounders up in the bow.

Morgan Slade was lifted off his feet as a six-pound ball tore through his body. The gun in Adam's hand dropped. He stared as Slade's lifeless body fell to the Texas, arms and head hanging over the low brass railing.

The second six-pounder went off a moment later, the ball ripping through the cabins on the Texas. There was a shout from Ed Cannivan, and turning Adam saw that Cannivan had manned the two little guns and was firing on the *Anthony Wayne* crew holed up in the cabins. One ball had gone astray and struck Morgan Slade.

Men were tearing out of the cabins, scrambling down from the Texas onto woodpiles, and then off the main deck into the water. Adam spotted Nathan Sears going over the side, and then he felt the *Anthony Wayne* began to list to one side.

Running back along the main deck, Adam yelled. "She's going. Get back, Cannivan, and cut those ropes."

Judy Greene crewmen scrambled back on board their own boat and cut at the ropes feverishly as the *Anthony Wayne* began to settle.

Tom Bolton was standing in the engine room door when Adam raced for the staircase. He yelled,

"We're backing off, Tom!"

Bolton disappeared, and then the big sternwheel began to revolve in reverse. Adam reached the pilot house just as they backed clear of the *Anthony Wayne,* the long, iron-clad spear tip pulling out of her side.

Slade's crewmen were swimming toward the shore as the packet started to settle in the deep water of the cove.

Very clearly, Adam saw Morgan Slade still sprawled where he'd been hit by the six-pounder ball.

Ed Cannivan came into the pilot house when they were halfway back across the cove and Adam was turning around to move out.

"It's a free river, Adam."

Adam McCall turned the *Judy Greene's* nose out into mid-stream with the intention of crossing the river and tying up on that side. He said to Cannivan,

"See if Miss Blackwell is all right, Ed."

He saw her coming up the steps to the pilot house then, and Ed Cannivan said softly,

"Seems kind of concerned about you, Adam."

Adam was thinking of a reply when the mate left, chuckling softly, and Lucinda Blackwell came in. He said to her, "Were you shaken up?"

"It was not too bad," the girl told him. "I heard the shooting and I came out. I—I saw—" She was almost crying.

"Don't talk about it," Adam told her. She was standing next to him, trembling, and he took one hand from the big wheel and put his arm around her. He said, "You'll be going home now, Lucinda."

She was silent for several moments, and then she said, "I have no home. Father died a few weeks before I left to find Jack."

Adam looked down at her. "I have no home either," he smiled. "The river is my home—all the home I'll ever want."

"You are fortunate," the girl whispered.

"I would be more fortunate," Adam said, "if there were someone willing to share that home with me. It is sometimes a lonesome life."

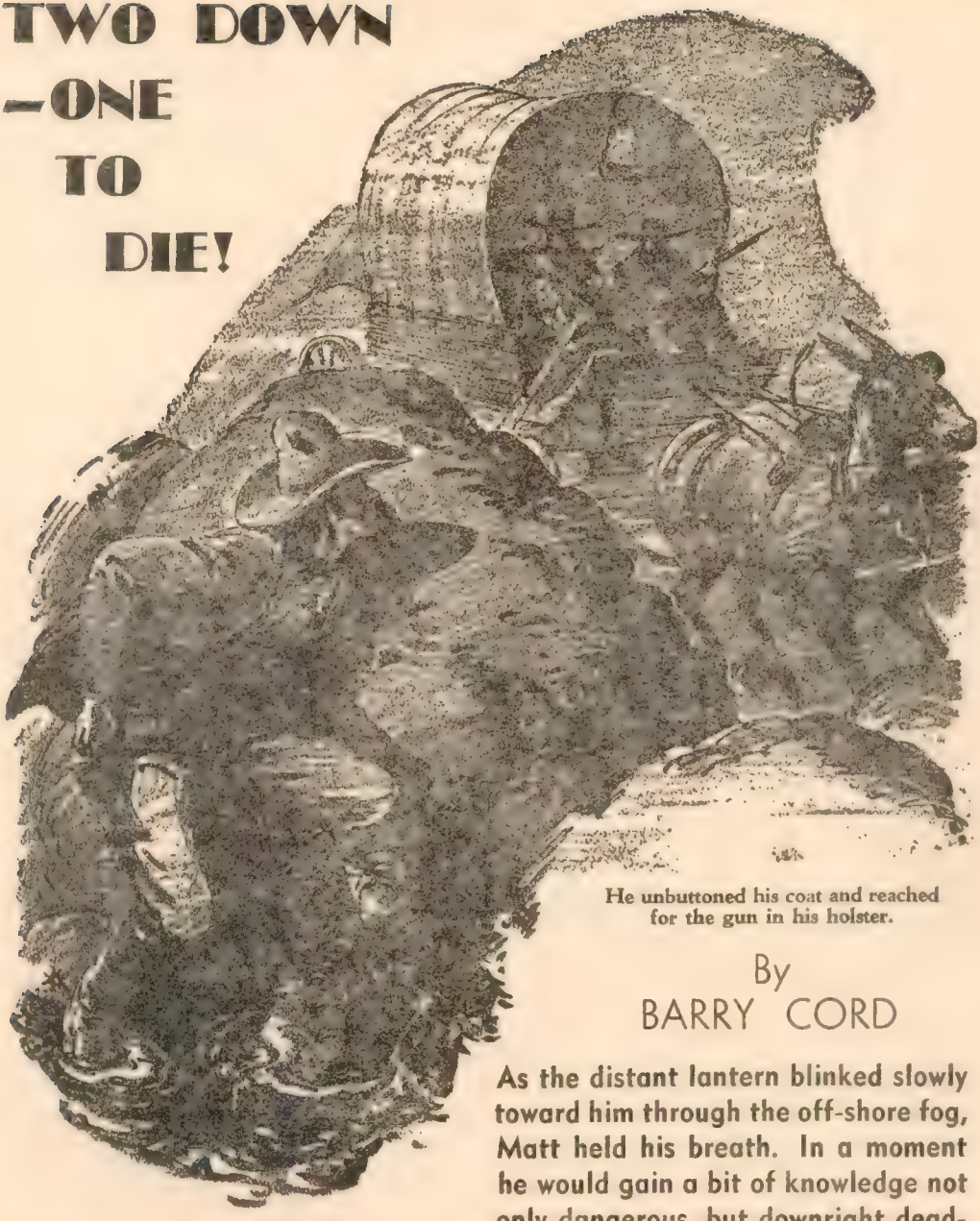
"Someone?" Lucinda Blackwell murmured.

"Someone in this pilot house," Adam McCall said. "If you'd like more time to think about it—"

He had his answer when she came closer to him, looking up into his face. He was thinking then of poor Ben Hallman who had supposed a woman brought bad luck to a Missouri steamer. He knew that this woman was bringing him only good luck, now and forever.

THE END

TWO DOWN —ONE TO DIE!



He unbuttoned his coat and reached for the gun in his holster.

By BARRY CORD

As the distant lantern blinked slowly toward him through the off-shore fog, Matt held his breath. In a moment he would gain a bit of knowledge not only dangerous, but downright deadly: The secret of Cauldron Point. . . .

THE ROLLERS broke against the rocks below the trail, the white spray making a lacey pattern against the green water, and to the dusty rider who had just crossed the rocky desert that tongued down to this section of the Gulf of Mexico, the sight of the sea was like a drink of cool water.

He had picked his own way across the desert. But there was a wagon road here on the bluff coming in from the west, and his gaze followed it down to the cluster of jerry-built shacks perched on the rocks above the small cove.

This is Manoas, he thought. This is where Tom came. He pushed his gaze past the town, past the empty cove, and let his tired eyes rest against the emptiness of the sea.

He was a tall man, sitting loosely in a Texas saddle. He had not shaved since leaving headquarters, and pin-points of blond beard roughened his lean, sun-blackened face. There was a deputy-marshal's badge pinned to the inside of his coat. It was there not because he wanted to deceive, but because he thought it good judgment not to advertise the fact.

After a time he drew his gaze back to Manoas, and the tired buckskin made no protest as he turned it onto the wagon road.

The road dipped down to the cove, curving past a small rock jetty extending out into blue water. A girl in tight-fitting levis, a faded blue shirt, and bared dark head sat with knees drawn up under her chin, a pole held indolently in her hands. She looked up as he rode past, and he caught the sudden curiosity in her eyes.

He looked back, found her still staring, and had the sudden, uncomfortable feeling that she knew him. But this was the first time he had come to Manoas, and he knew there was no reason for his thought.

The buckskin caught the smell of hay and swung off the road of its own accord. The barn had a small pen in the back and a sign over the door: Stables. A wizened man with a stump for a left arm and a corncob between stubby teeth took his horse and nodded at his question.

"The Sea Horse—next door. Drinks an' eats." He squinted at Matt, his crinkled old eyes taking in the tough leanness of this newcomer, noting that the dusty gray coat only partially hid the bone handle of a Colt .45.

"Puncher?"

Matt shrugged. "Off an' on."

The stableman chuckled. "Not many of you cow-rasslers come down this way now," he observed. "Used to be a time though—"

"Ever get a ship in here?" Matt interrupted. "I want to get down to Tampico."

The stableman shook his head. "Not any more." He studied Matt's face. "You're the second hombre thet asked. The other feller was a cow-rassler, too."

Matt's eyes showed no particular interest. "Did he get a ship?"

"Never got out of town," the stableman replied. "One of the Mex fishermen found his body in the cove. We buried him on the hill there. Margo put up the cross."

Matt followed the other's pointing finger and saw the cross on the hill. After a moment he said: "Tough break for him." He turned and walked away.

THE Sea Horse was a straggling, two-story shack dominating Manoas. Matt hesitated under the creaking sign. The smell of the sea was strong here, washing up from the shacks closer to the beach, where he could see nets strung out to dry.

He rolled a cigarette and lighted it, and then, involuntarily he turned to look at the bare slope immediately north of town where a single cross was limned against the afternoon sky. When he finally shifted his gaze his interest was caught by a small coastwise sailing vessel that was tacking into the cove.

The vessel dropped anchor a hundred yards from the jetty. Matt waited. He saw the girl get to her feet and secure her line. Then he turned and stepped inside the Sea Horse.

The room held within it the pungent smell of salt water. A long-handled harpoon graced the wall behind the short, varnished bar. It was the sole nautical touch in a room consisting of tables and chairs of nondescript make, and a small box piano sitting incongruously in a corner.

A tall, spare man with a shock of white hair and a black patch over one eye was behind the bar, stropping a straight razor on a leather belt. He turned and glanced at Matt, his face covered with a foam of lather.

"Go ahead," Matt said, leaning an elbow on the bar. "I can wait."

The tall man put the razor down on the bar top and wiped his face on a towel. "Just shavin' to kill time," he said. "What you havin'?"

Matt glanced at the bottles lined up behind the bar. "Old Remington."

"Good whiskey," the other nodded. He set up a glass and poured, leaving the bottle before Matt. "Don't get any of you

fellers down this way any more," he said conversationally. "Not since they quit shippin' hides."

Matt shrugged. "Cattle are goin' north —to Abilene. On the hoof. Chicago stockyards are crying for Texas beef."

The bartender nodded. "I heard about the cattle drives. Well, every man to his own game. Mine was whaling. Got paid off in San Diego the last time and got this far across country. Been here ever since. Fifteen years."

Matt said: "A long time to be—" He turned and watched the girl come into the room carrying the pole over her shoulder. A four-pound red snapper dangled from a short length of line in her left hand. Her levis were rolled up to the knees. She was brown and boyish in man's clothes, but the faded cotton shirt swelled over a woman's bosom and there was a woman's steadiness in her gray eyes.

She let her glance take in Matt as she walked past, then it moved on to the barman and her teeth flashed whitely as she smiled. "Quit fishin' when I caught this one, Tim," she said. "I'll have it panfried and ready in twenty minutes."

Tim nodded. He watched her walk across the room and disappear through a doorway in the rear, then he turned to Matt. "You're welcome to sit in, stranger. Ain't a better cook in Manoas, though maybe you won't believe it, lookin' at her."

"Yo're wrong," Matt said, smiling. "I do believe it, lookin' at her. An' I'd be mighty pleased to join you. You shore," he added slowly, "yo're daughter won't mind?"

"She ain't my daughter," the bartender said. "An' you might as well call me Tim. Everyone else does."

"I answer to Matt," the other said. He was thinking of what the stableman had said, and of the little cross on the bluff overlooking the cove.

"Margo is the daughter of an old friend of mine," Tim said. He glanced at the harpoon, as if associating it with the friend. "When he died I promised him I'd look up his family. Didn't get back until two years later. Margo's mother died the same week. Margo was five years old—"

He paused as the door creaked. Matt turned aside as a wrinkled Mexican woman, sombre in a black shawl, came toward the bar. Tim reached under the bar for a bottle as she mumbled her wants. "Manuel can pay me when he gets on his feet again," he said gruffly, refusing the woman's grimy coins.

"Gracias, señor—gracias," the woman said. She turned without looking at Matt and shuffled out the door.

MATT wandered over to the piano. He ran his finger over the keys, tapped an off-tune note several times and glanced questioningly at Tim.

The ex-whaler shrugged. "Margo plays —when she's in the mood. Sometimes plays all afternoon. Then—" he made a gesture with his hand— "then she doesn't go near it for a week."

Matt slid a leg over the stool and sat down. "Been a long time since I last handled one of these things, he confessed. "Last time was at my brother's weddin' . . ." He frowned, and ran his fingers lightly over the yellowed keys.

Tim leaned his elbows on the bar. "Haven't heard the weddin' march played like that since I was a boy—"

"Say, who's getting hitched?" boomed a voice. The words preceded the man's hand as he shoved the door against the wall and stepped inside. He was a burly man, a head shorter than Matt, with a square, weatherbeaten face and a rolling walk. He stamped in, his left hand still in the pocket of his seaman's short coat. He stopped before he reached the bar, turning to stare at Matt. "Thought it was Margo," he said, scowling. "Didn't expect nobody wearing pants would be playin' that thing, Tim."

Matt glanced over his shoulder at the man, then continued playing.

Tim said, without warmth: "Hello, Captain. Didn't expect to see you in Manoas until spring."

Captain Bremen walked to the bar, tossed Matt's glass aside and reached over for a clean one. He poured his own drink out of the Remington bottle and drank it. His scowl pulled the thin white line of an old scar over his right eye into an inverted V.

"Came up the coast from Tampico," he said surlily. "Dropped anchor to see you— an' Margo." He tilted the bottle again and slopped whiskey over the bar.

"Hey!" he suddenly yelled. He slammed

the bottle on the bar and whirled, facing Matt. "Hey, you! Get away from that piano!"

Matt swung around on the stool. "What's the matter?" he asked coldly. "The music bother you?"

"Yeah," the captain snapped. His red face had an angry flush. "I brought that piano over for Margo, not for every tinker's son that drifts in here. Get away from that piano an' get out of here!"

Matt's lips went crooked. He looked the burly captain over, shrugged carelessly, and went back to playing. He heard the man's shoes scuff across the floor, felt the man's whiskey breath on his neck, and he started to turn.

Tim's voice rapped across the room: "Don't be a fool, Bremen! He's only—"

Hard fingers closed on Matt's shoulder, pulling him roughly back off the stool. He lost his balance and sat down. The captain's flushed, scowling face loomed over him as Bremen reached down for a handful of Matt's coat.

Matt slapped the hand aside and came up like a cat, legs bunched under him, left hand swinging. He felt his knuckles jar against the other's heavy jaw, and he followed through with a quick, chopping right-hand smash.

The captain went back against the piano. His weight moved it back several inches and he slid down, his right elbow jamming down on the keys. The discord jangled in the room.

He hung there, shaking his head, his black eyes glaring. He recovered fast. He slipped his right hand into his coat, and bounced forward.

Matt didn't wait to see if it was a gun the captain was reaching for. He drew his own Colt in a swift, smooth motion and jammed the muzzle deep into the seaman's unprotected stomach.

Bremen turned green around the mouth. Matt cuffed him roughly aside as he fell forward. Bremen went down on his face and lay there, gasping for breath.

Matt stepped back, holstered his gun, and glanced at Tim. The bartender was leaning over the counter, as if he had been getting ready for something that didn't come off. The girl had come to the inner doorway. The apron tied over her levis made her look feminine and homey.

"Sorry it had to happen, Tim," Matt said. "Seein' he's a friend of yores. And thanks for the dinner invitation. But I reckon I better leave before he gets his breath an' his belligerency back. No use having to kill him."

He walked to the door, looked back and nodded politely to the staring girl. Then he closed the door behind him.

HE HAD tortillas, frijoles and Mexican beer in a cantina on the edge of the beach. From his table near the dirty window he could see the jetty. A dinghy was tied up alongside. A bony man in a peaked cap was sitting by the dinghy, whittling.

Matt paid his bill and walked out. He looked up the road to the Sea Horse, but the captain did not reappear. He reached inside his shirt pocket for his Bull Durham sack and rolled a cigarette. After he lighted it he started to walk along the road winding up above the town. He followed it west until he found the path that led to the knoll where his brother's grave lay.

The cross had the name TOM knifed into it. Under it the simple epitaph: REST IN PEACE.

He stood silent, feeling the wind pluck at his coat sleeves. He had been present at his brother's wedding not too long ago, and now he stood at his grave. He felt the loss, but it was a vague thing, tempered by the knowledge that death was part of the risk his brother had run, coming here. And now it was his—

"Hello."

He turned swiftly, but caught the instinctive motion of his hand for his gun, and reached up to touch his Stetson instead. "Hello," he said quietly.

Margo came up the path until she stood at his side. She walked with a lithe grace, and he was surprised to see that she reached to the level of his eyes. She looked smaller and younger from a distance, but he remembered that she was twenty, and he was not much older himself.

"I thought you'd come up here," she said. "After hearing you play Mendelssohn's Wedding March."

He frowned. "Why?"

She did not immediately answer. Her glance indicated the grave. "You knew him?"

He nodded. "My brother."

"Oh!" She was silent, her eyes holding sympathy and a new understanding. "I didn't know him very well," she said after a time. "He used to come into the Sea Horse often, and sometimes he'd be away for a day or two. He kept asking about ships. . . ." She looked at Matt, her eyes curious. "One day he told me something that sounded very strange."

"Strange?"

"Yes. He said: 'If something should happen to me, Margo, there'll be another rider that will come to Manoas. You'll know him because he'll play the piano—and he will play Mendelssohn's Wedding March. When you see that man, take him out to Cauldron Point. And tell him this: *When the fog comes in.*'

"That's what he said, Matt," the girl ended. "*'When the fog comes in!'*"

Matt's eyes quickened. "When did he tell you this, Margo?"

"Two days before he was found. . . ."

Matt was silent. He felt Margo's questioning glance on him, but she did not put her question in words. "Will you show me Cauldron Point?" he said.

"Of course." She glanced at the afternoon sun. "We can be back before night, if we leave now."

"Do you have a mount?"

"Mike'll let me have one. He owns the stables. I'll meet you there as soon as I pick up a jacket—"

"No," Matt interrupted. "Meet me up the trail, by that bald butte." He indicated the point with his eyes. "I think it'll be best if we do not leave Manoas together."

* * *

Cauldron Point was a bare, rocky ridge that extended from the desolate, coppery hills into the sea. It curled like a withered, giant arm against which the green swells smashed and boiled into white froth. But within the hook of this ridge the water lay quiet and a strip of beach sloped up to rocky ground.

The wind blew freely across the ridge and the girl drew her jacket tighter about her. Matt's gaze moved from the beach and followed an unseen trail into the rocky hills. Due west, across the desert, lay Selby, a small mining town. It was from Selby that he had picked up the trail. . . .

"Tom left me somethin' to go by, Margo," he said slowly. "If somethin' should happen to me, I would like to leave a similar message. Another man will come down the trail to Manoas. He won't play the piano. He'll be redheaded an' several inches shorter than I. But you'll know him by the way he lights a cigarette. Even when there's no wind he cups it with his left hand—like this."

Margo's eyes darkened. "They said Tom's death was an accident. But you don't think so?"

Matt shook his head.

"Why? Why should anyone kill him? What is there here? What did he mean by 'When the fog comes in'?"

"I'll tell you later," Matt said. "But not now."

She looked at the hardness of his face and did not persist. "We should be riding if we want to get back before night."

"One thing," he said, as they swung away from the ridge. "Was Captain Bremen in Manoas the day before Tom's body was found?"

Margo shook her head. "This is the first time Captain Bremen's been in port in six months."

THE FOG came in along the coast the next night, shrouding the bare hills with grayness. It had given warning of its coming. Even to an inlander, the mist gathering out at sea was a sign. And hours before the sun set the fog trailed in, dragging clammy fingers over the shacks of Manoas.

The sun glowed briefly, like the end view of a red hot iron bar, and like that bar it cooled and faded.

Matt was at Cauldron Point before the sun went down. He had watched Bremen's ship up-anchor and leave the cove earlier in the day, and two hours later, he had dropped into the Sea Horse to say goodbye to Tim and Margo.

He didn't know where Tim fitted in this play, and he didn't know if Tim believed him. Margo didn't say anything. She walked to the door with him and looked out where the fog was hiding the jetty.

"I'll be waiting for the redheaded man you mentioned," she said, her voice dry and catching. Then she turned and went back inside, and he walked down to Mike's stables and saddled.

He had left the buckskin picketed in a draw behind the ridge. He was crouched down at the base of Cauldron Point, close to where the water sucked softly against the rocks. The beach was hidden by the fog.

He had been waiting for more than an hour and impatience began to fret in him. He reached for his tobacco and was rolling a smoke before he realized what he was doing. He tossed paper and tobacco aside and suddenly grew alert.

Wagon wheels rumbled over rock. Harness jingled. A voice cursed softly, and then a whip cracked sharply.

Matt eased back between wet rocks and unbuttoned his coat, giving himself easy access to the gun in his holster.

The wagon was coming down to the beach. Matt kept his eyes glued to the sound and after a while he saw the grayness move. Mules formed out of the fog, then the bulk of a covered wagon. The rear axle squealed as the vehicle swung past Matt and came to a halt a few feet short of the water. Matt saw two men in the seat—the driver and a bearded man with a rifle across his lap.

The driver tied the reins to the brake lever at his side and got up. "There oughta be a better way," he growled, stretching. "Damn it, Fred, it took six days this time. Six days waitin' for this damn fog."

"It's the safe way," the other said. He got up and peered into the dark. "Anyway," he said, sitting down again. "What you growlin' about? We're gettin' paid for this, ain't we?"

"There's his light," the driver growled. "Get ours."

Matt slipped out of the rocks as the driver turned. The fog and the water sucking against the rocks covered his passage. The whiskered guard was fumbling around inside the wagon for the lantern. Somewhere out at sea a foghorn tooted once.

Matt parted the drop canvas and climbed over the tailboard into the wagon. It was quite empty. The driver and the guard were silhouetted against the grayness of the sea. The guard was standing up and holding a red-glassed lantern in his hand. He waved it in a short circle.

The foghorn tooted in acknowledgement.

The guard sat down and blew out the light. He turned and thrust his head and shoulders into the wagon and placed the lantern down.

Matt hit him with his palmed Colt. The man did not even grunt. His supporting arm crumbled under him and he jackknifed over the seat.

The driver swung around as the man beside him collapsed. He dimly saw the muzzle of Matt's Colt an inch from his nose and he tried to jump clear. Matt's fingers closed on his coat and jerked him forward. Matt's gun chopped down across his face.

It split the driver's cheek wide open. The man jerked free and tried to yell. Matt's fingers closed around his throat, choking the cry into a wheezy gurgle. Matt's Colt chopped down again. The driver went limp, slumping down in the seat. Matt dragged him into the wagon. He went back and pulled the guard in beside the driver.

Somewhere out in the small cove oarlocks rattled. Matt hesitated. There was no time to secure the two men at his feet. He'd have to take chances that they wouldn't come to in time to spoil his play.

Crawling out onto the seat he made himself comfortable, his Colt held easily in his lap.

The dinghy loomed out of the fog. There was a man in the bow, holding a lantern. There was one at the oars and three smaller figures huddled in the stern.

The dinghy grated on sand and the burly figure jumped out and hauled the skiff further up on the beach. When he turned Matt saw it was Captain Bremen. It did not surprise him. The captain came toward the wagon, leaving the others to follow.

The lantern cast a ragged ring of light around him. He looked up at Matt, not recognizing him in the grayness. "Got twenty for yuh this time, Campbell."

Matt waited. The others were coming up behind the captain. The oarsman was the same man in the peaked cap he had seen in Manoas. The other three were Chinese.

The captain handed the lantern to his oarsman. "Here's yore split," he said, reaching inside his coatpocket.

Matt stood up. "I'll take it, captain," he said coldly. "Campbell won't be needin' it where he's goin'."

Bremen stiffened. "You!" He whirled and tried to get away from the light.

Matt shot him in the leg.

Bremen ploughed hands first into the wet sand. He rolled over and sat up, digging his right hand inside his coat. He got in a wild shot before Matt's second bullet smashed his shoulder.

The bewildered Chinese shrank back as Matt jumped down and walked toward them, gun in hand. The seaman holding the light said: "Count me out of this, lawman."

"I'm countin' you in," Matt said dryly. He stepped behind him and ran his free hand along the man's body. He found a pocket knife and tossed it into the darkness.

"Get him in the wagon," he snapped, indicating the groaning captain with a jerk of his thumb. "You!" he said to the Chinamen. "Help him!"

He held the light in his left hand and the Colt in the other and supervised the operation. Out in the cove the foghorn tooted a puzzled blast, then fell silent.

Matt shrugged. He could imagine the puzzled crew aboard, wondering what had happened here in the fog. He would have liked to have boarded her and complete the cleanup of this ring that had been smuggling illegal Chinese into the States. But he had his hands full with the men he had in the wagon, and he knew that once realization came to the men on the ship of what had happened, there would not be another attempt to work that game here.

"You," he said to the seaman. "Get out on that seat an' take the reins. We're goin' to Manoas."

"In this fog?" the man said.

"In this fog," Matt growled. "Take it easy. We've got all night."

THE CURIOUS citizens of Manoas gathered around the wagon as it rumbled into town. Matt's buckskin was tied to the tailgate. Tim came out of the Sea Horse with Margo. Matt was riding in the seat beside a sullen driver, a rifle held carelessly across his lap.

Tim stepped down. "I thought there was something about you, Matt," he said. "Was the other feller a lawman, too?"

Matt nodded. "We began pickin' up a lot of Chinese in Selby an' other towns north of the desert. Illegal entry. Someone was smuggling them in, but they wouldn't talk. We finally narrowed it down to somewhere near Manoas. Tom was killed finding out."

"Bremen was a friend of mine," Tim said. "But I swear I never suspected—"

Matt shrugged. He looked down at Margo. "I've got to report in at headquarters," he said. "But I'll be back this way."

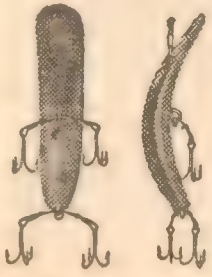
"With the redheaded man who cups his cigarettes in his left hand?" the girl said teasingly.

"Alone," Matt said. He bent down and rumpled her dark hair. "Alone," he repeated smiling. "String up another rod for me. I'll be joinin' you on the jetty."

The girl laughed. "I'll be waiting." She stepped back as the mules swung around in the narrow street, and there was a high flush in her tanned cheeks as Matt turned and waved to her.

"I'll be waiting," she breathed.

THEY CAN'T SHAKE LOOSE FROM A FLATFISH!



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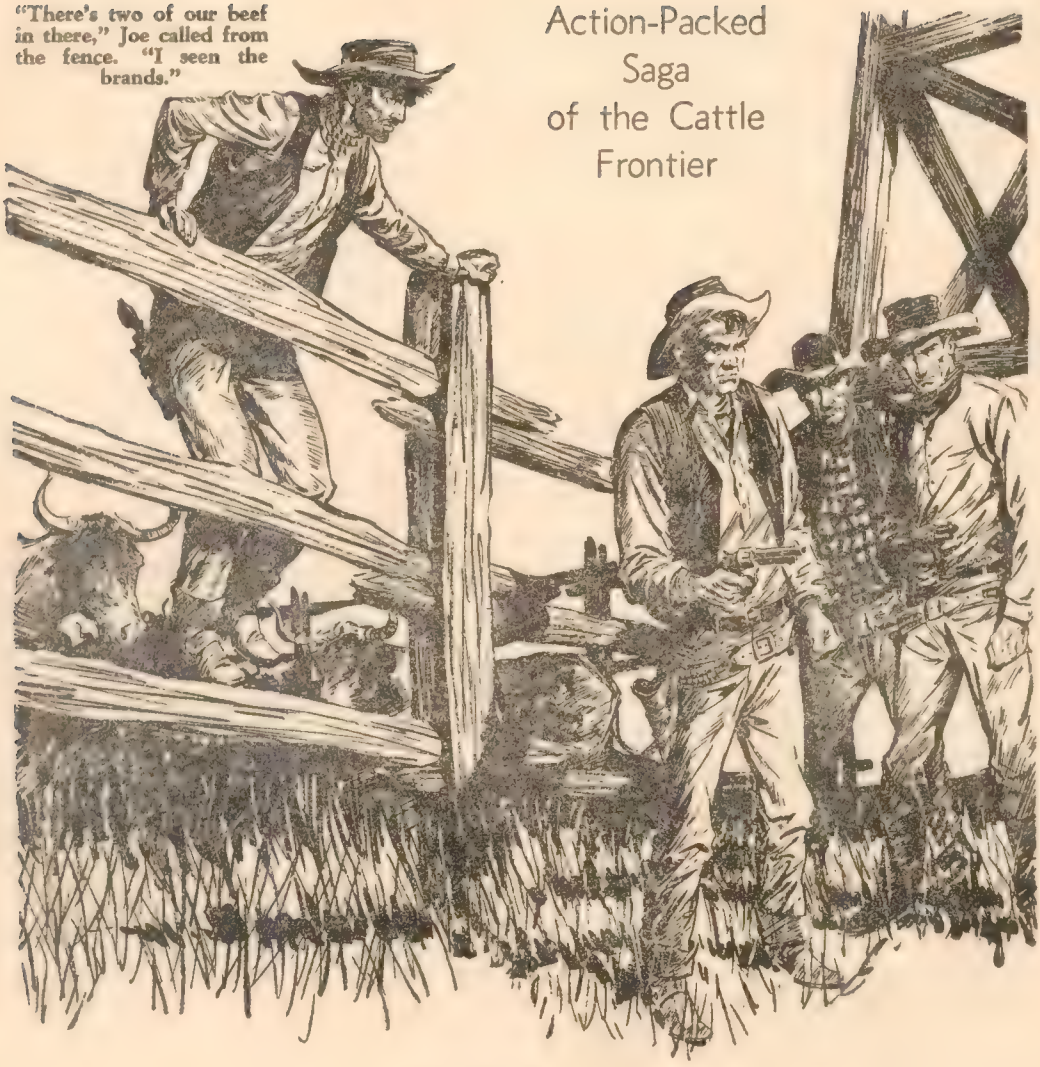


CHAPTER ONE

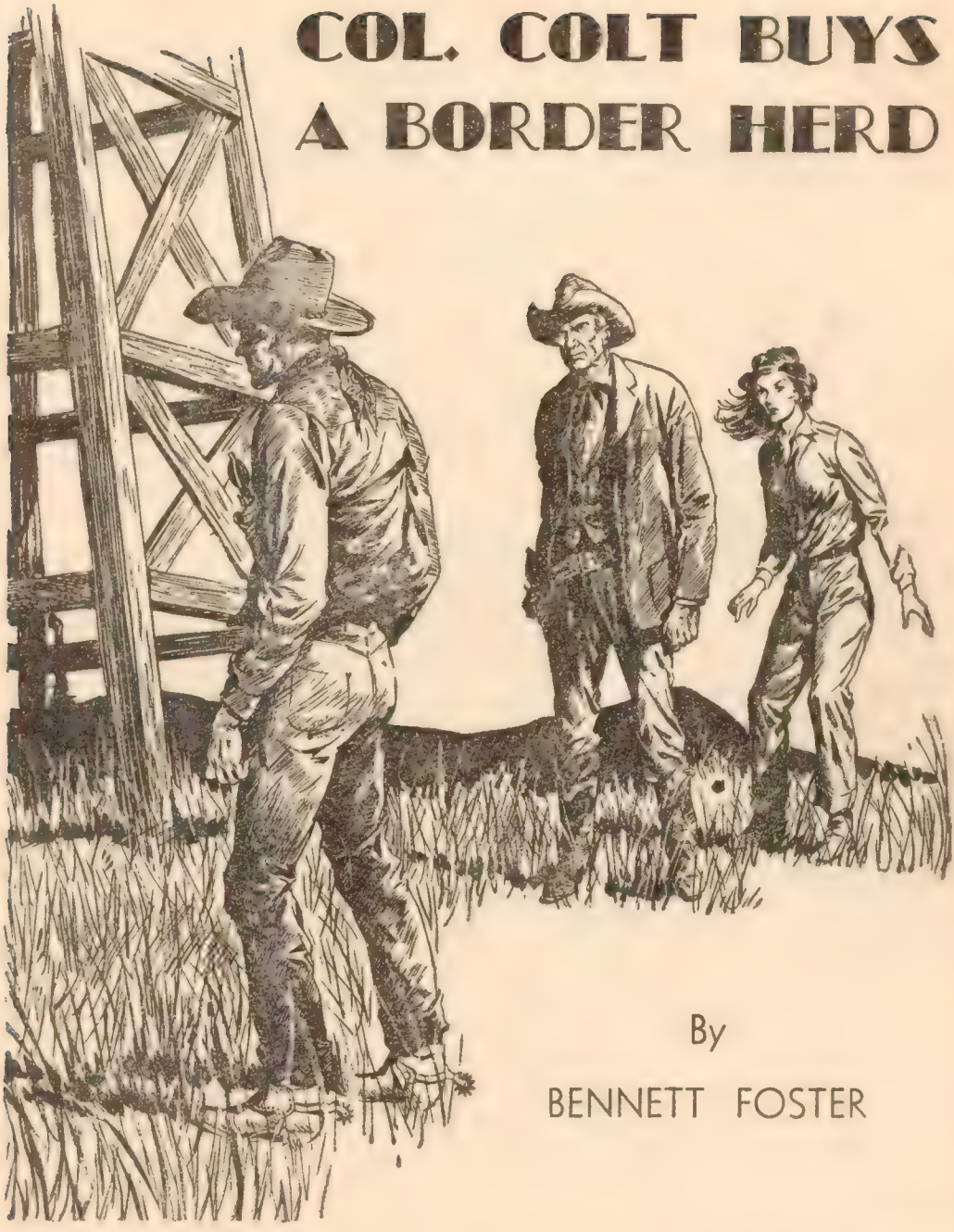
Ride Out, Stranger!

McBRIDE reached Piojoso as the sun went down, a compact, hard-twisted man upon a compact, hard-twisted horse. The day's dust mantled him and with the dust, he carried an air of calm assurance, the certainty of a man who knows he is a man. Dust and assurance were visible; hidden were the money belt about his waist and a .45 caliber Bisley model Colt in a shoulder holster.

Five buildings made Piojoso. Two stores confronted each other across a dusty space. Beside the smaller of the two was a saloon, beside the larger, a blacksmith shop with wagon yard attached. McBride left the horse, Shorty, in the wagon yard, grain in the feed box, hay in the manger.

The store by the saloon was old, the porch roof sagging, the porch floor uncertain. In its interior a single coaloil lamp struggled against the growing darkness, and the man who appeared as McBride opened the screen, seemed feeble as the lamp. A small man, a wispy man, with a fringe of white about his bald spot, and a long, shrewd face.

COL. COLT BUYS A BORDER HERD



By

BENNETT FOSTER

In Piojoso, McBride figured to swap his money belt for a herd and move on. But all that leather-necked cattle buyer could get for his clinking cartwheels in that man-for-breakfast Border town would be a lonely boothill plot, just big enough to hold one hundred and eighty pounds of fighting man!

"The hostler told me I might be able to get a bed here," said McBride. "Is that right?"

"Depends," the wispy man said, "on what you call a bed. You can sleep on the counter."

"Suits me," McBride agreed, and advanced into the store. "I need supper, too. Sardines and crackers, and a can of tomatoes."

The storekeeper moved, his wooden peg thumping on the floor. McBride, easing himself up on the counter, used an expert hatchet on the tomato can.

"Any cattle for sale around here?" he asked.

"Nope." The storekeeper's eyes were bright and quick. "You buy cattle?"

"Not if there's none for sale." McBride drank tomato juice. "It's cattle country, ain't it? I passed some little outfits on the way. *Paisanos,* I took 'em to be."

"Cattle country, but there's no cattle for sale." Now that the cans were opened, the storekeeper replaced the hatchet beneath the counter. "Mister Norwood buys the cattle." There was heavy emphasis on the word, Mister. He paused, then: "The grub's six bits. Nothin' for the bed. Pay for the grub now."

McBride put a half-dollar and a quarter on the counter. The money was pocketed. "I'll leave the lamp," the storekeeper said. "Blankets are on the shelf. Throw your cans out the door." He stumped toward the rear of the room, pausing at the door. "You won't sleep nohow," he said. "It's Saturday night."

The door slammed. McBride could hear the peg thump as his host moved about. He finished the last of his tomatoes. Piojoso, he thought. *Piojoso* means lousy. Lousy is right.

Six blankets on the counter made a bed; a seventh made a pillow. McBride put the Bisley Colt beside the pillow, added his coat for padding and placed his boots beside the counter. He cupped his hand behind the lamp chimney, puffed, and in the ensuing darkness stretched out, adjusting himself to the familiar burden of the money belt, the familiar lump of the Colt. In the darkness a cricket took up an endless song. From the saloon came a murmur of voices. Horses trotted up and stopped, and the murmur was augmented. Tomorrow, McBride thought sleepily, he would move along. He had six thousand dollars and in a country this far away from a market, that would buy a bunch of cattle. He yawned and remembered what the storekeeper had said: "Mister Norwood buys the cattle." Somebody had a lead-pipe cinch around Piojoso, McBride thought. Somebody named Norwood was doing all right. Maybe he wouldn't go on in the morning. Maybe he'd stay and. . . . The endless song of the cricket seemed to fade. McBride slept.

He awakened bolt upright, the Bisley Colt in his hand, the echo of a shot still ringing in his ears. A shrill yelling sounded from the saloon, high pitched and raucous. McBride grunted and lay back again. Some fool celebrating. Now he knew why the storekeeper had said he wouldn't sleep. The yelling raised in pitch and another shot thudded. McBride swore. If this kept up, his host would have the right of it. High spirits and a Saturday night celebration were all right in their place, but he wished the place was far away. He wished—

A third shot tore through the thin boards of the store wall, splintering them, and a can just above McBride's head, gave a mournful chug. McBride slid down from the counter, pulled on his boots and possessed himself of hat and Colt. Fun was fun, but the store walls were too damned thin. He rubbed his hand over his beard-stubbled chin and strode purposefully to the door. After all, a man was entitled to his rest.

THE saloon, when he walked in, was bright with light. There were three men, riders by their dress, against the bar, their faces uncertain. The bald headed bartender was looking ruefully at broken bottles on the backbar. Four natives were collected sullenly at the end of the bar and, in the center of the room, was a youngster, blond haired, well dressed, a whisky glass in one hand, a long barreled gun in the other. The blond haired man was laughing but there was nothing mirthful in the laugh, nothing mirthful in his pale eyes, either.

"I'm goin' to take one more drink an' then kill me a Mexican," the blond man stated. "One of these here Mexicans. Fill 'er up, Curly."

He was, McBride decided, not nearly so drunk as he pretended, but he was drunk enough to be mean. The bald bartender,

Curly, moved uneasily, and one of the men at the bar said: "Now, Reeder," placatingly.

McBride walked forward. "Give me that gun," he said.

The blond man turned. The pale blue eyes narrowed. "Who are you?" he demanded. "What'uh you mean, 'Gimme that gun?' Nobody gets my gun!"

"I'm a man that likes his sleep," McBride stated. "Give it here." His left hand was extended. He was close to the blond man. The gun swept up.

"To hell with you!" Light in the slitted blue eyes, sudden cruelty in the sullen mouth. McBride, agile as a cat, moved in and aside. The Bisley Colt, produced from nowhere seemingly, thudded against blond hair. The sullen mouth flew wide open, the blue eyes glazed. The blond haired man went down, sprawled on the floor.

McBride faced the room. "I'm sleepin' next door," he said apologetically. "I've come a long ways today and I'm tired. Suppose you fellers go home now?"

Curly, the bald bartender, craned across the bar. "Did you kill him?" he demanded, then seeing the blond man's legs move: "No, damn it! That's too bad. All right, boys, I'm closin' up."

At the bar the riders moved, the shock of the sudden action dissipated now, their wits recovered. One went out, but two lingered, looking questioningly at McBride.

"If he belongs to you," McBride said, "you're welcome to him. Only don't get any fool ideas." The Bisley Colt was still prominent in his hand.

"We work for his old man, mister," one of the riders said.

"Go on an' take him home, Joe," Curly ordered.

Joe and his fellow lifted the blond man. The natives had already disappeared, flitting silently through the door. With the blond man sagging between them, the two burden bearers walked out.

"You want a drink?" Curly asked.

McBride shook his head. "I just want to sleep," he said. "Good-night."

A rattling and banging of tin wakened McBride. He heard the thump of the storekeeper's peg and daylight filled his sight. Sitting up, he rubbed his sleepy eyes then arose from behind the counter where he had moved his bed.

The storekeeper looked at McBride reproachfully. "A washbasin an' a tub balanced against my door," he said. "A half dozen buckets an' a twenty gallon can against the front door. You call that friendly?" The voice was chiding but there was a change in the storekeeper's manner. He seemed more spry, more full of life.

"Did you," McBride asked, "ever hear the story about the man in the insane asylum? He was naked except for a derby hat. When they asked him why he was naked he said nobody ever come to see him. When they asked him why the hat? he says that somebody *might* come."

The wispy man nodded. "You wasn't expecting nobody," he said, "but you was fixed to receive 'em. I see. Know who it was you buffaloed last night? That was Reeder Norwood."

McBride's eyes said that the name meant nothing. The storekeeper said: "Reeder's daddy, ol' Berry Norwood, is the he-coon of Piojoso."

"Oh," said McBride. "The man that buys cattle, huh?"

"An' runs most of the country. What's your name, mister?"

"McBride."

"Mine's Jim Sledge. There's a pump out back you can wash up at, an' I'm makin' coffee. Better come an' have some." The storekeeper stumped away.

Times change, McBride thought as he pulled on his boots.

The pump water was cold, the coffee hot, the ham and eggs that accompanied it filling. Tobacco was sweet in the morning. Sledge, pouring McBride's third cup, gave testimony.

"Curly Lerch, him that runs the saloon, tol' me what happened. Reeder didn't have all his bunch along last night. Noone Padden was missin'."

"Padden?" McBride savored the coffee.

"Norwood's foreman at his ranch. Reeder's kind of Padden's student, you might say. Padden's the teacher when it comes to hell raisin'."

McBride absorbed the knowledge. What Sledge meant to say was that, had the teacher been present, McBride would not have had so easy a time with the pupil.

"Do you," said McBride, "know any cattle that are for sale this mornin'? You said last night that Norwood bought around here. A little competition helps the prices

an' that's good for business, you know."

"I was comin' to that. I know where you can buy mebbe a hundred head in one bunch: cows, calves, mebbe some steers an' bulls."

"Where?"

" 'Bout fifteen miles from town. At the Diamond Bar. Lewis Titus has got 'em. You go this away." Sledge's finger outlined a patch on the oilcloth.

"I'll look at 'em," McBride decided.

"You can come back here tonight," Sledge said. "I got an extra bed. Better'n the counter."

"Fine." McBride got up.

"You want I should get your horse?"

"Why?"

"It's Norwood's wagon yard. Mebbe—"

"It's my horse," said McBride. "Thanks. I'll see you tonight."

* * *

Shorty, McBride saw, had been fed. There was still grain in the box. The bay horse munched philosophically on the bitt while McBride smoothed the saddle blanket in place. He had reached for the saddle when a tall man, gray haired, blank faced, walked into the wagon yard. McBride swung the saddle up, shook it and reached under Shorty for the cinch.

"Leavin'?" asked the tall man.

"For awhile," McBride answered.

"No," the tall man refuted. "For good. That was my boy you hit last night."

Then the tall man was Berry Norwood. McBride paused in his saddling and surveyed the man. Blond Reeder Norwood was a minor copy of his father. Berry Norwood's eyes were pale blue, as were Reeder's, his mouth more cruel, his face harder, the lines deeper cut. A dangerous man, McBride thought; a man to watch, a man to be afraid of, if you wanted to be afraid.

"Your boy was drunk," McBride said. "And dangerous. And I was tired."

"You made a mistake," Norwood said. "But you didn't know. Ride out, now. Don't come back."

"I'm goin'," McBride said, foot in stirrup, reins in hand, "to look at some cattle. Maybe I'll buy 'em. I travel where I please. When I please. How I please. I stay where I want to stay. *Hasta la vista,* Mr. Norwood." He swung into the saddle. Shorty walked toward the gate.

"I've told you," Norwood warned as McBride passed.

"That's right," McBride agreed. "You told me."

He rode south out of Piojoso. Five miles and he left the mesa top. Below him the country spread, cut by canyons, red rimrock riding the bluff tops. Shelter here, timber and canyons, water, grass. Cattle country. Three miles down the canyon McBride came to a house, a bunch of calves weaning in the pen behind it. He turned and rode in.

Spanish was McBride's second tongue, learned along the Border, perfected in Mexico. Juan Villareal, coming from the corrals, met his visitor. Villareal's face was familiar and McBride placed the man as one of the natives he had seen in Curly's saloon. The calves, Villareal said, were not for sale.

Gently McBride pressed his point, not seeming to pry, not too eager, just talking. Mr. Norwood bought the calves, Juan said. Well, not exactly bought them, but he, Juan Villareal, owed money at the store and in a way the calves were security. How much for the calves? Ten dollars perhaps . . . perhaps twelve.

McBride said that he might be able to offer a more attractive price. He would return. He rode on down the hill.

He had the story now and it was simple enough. Men worked on credit from one fall to the next. They owed money at Norwood's store, and they sold their calves to Norwood. McBride had seen peonage work in Mexico. It would work here. Only one menace to Norwood's system: if a cowbuyer came in, offering fair prices, Norwood was hurt. Such a man must be disposed of, driven out. McBride smiled thinly.

The canyon leveled off and widened. The sun was high. Shorty and McBride watered at a tank, went on. The road split and McBride checked. Right hand or left hand? He had forgotten what Sledge said. Had Sledge mentioned the road fork at all? Rock rattled and McBride looked up.

A kid, riding on a red steer, came down the hill. The kid was black headed, like McBride. His eyes were gray, like McBride's. He wore overalls, a denim shirt and a straw hat, nothing else. Tanned hide showed through rents in shirt and overalls. He was whirling a sling and, as McBride watched, let go. The stone clunked into a

yucca. The red steer had a ring in its nose, two rope reins extending from it, but as the kid bent his mount to join McBride, it was evident that the steer had been bridlewise for a long time.

"Mornin'," McBride greeted.

"Mornin'." The two pairs of level gray eyes met and the kid grinned suddenly. Full mouthed, McBride thought. He's over twelve.

"I'm kind of mixed up," he said. "I'm lookin' for Lewis Titus' place."

"Lois Titus? She lives yonder." The boy pointed.

"Lewis," McBride corrected.

"There ain't no Lewis. Lois owns the Diamond Bar."

Mentally McBride swore. Sledge had said, Lewis. McBride disliked doing business with women. Women, his experience said, didn't know their own mind. They'd make a bargain one minute and then back out the next.

"I'm goin' down there," the kid said. "I'll take you."

The red steer ambled down the right hand road. Shorty caught up.

"My name's Fairweather," the kid said. "Dave Fairweather. What's your name, stranger?"

"McBride. Your folks in the cowbusiness?"

"I ain't got folks." The small face frowned. "I own cattle, though. Red's mine, an' I got two cows, too."

"Calves on the cows?" McBride repressed his grin.

"Heifer an' a steer calf. Best two you'll ever see."

"I buy cattle," McBride stated. "Want to sell your calves?"

"I'll sell the steer. What are you payin'?"

"I'd have to look at him," McBride answered. "I'll pay from fifteen to eighteen dollars, dependin' on the calf."

Mental arithmetic went on behind the boy's gray eyes. "That's more'n Norwood pays," he said finally. "You bought a calf, mister."

One calf bought in the Piojoso country. "I'll let you know where to deliver," McBride said. "Here's earnest money." He extended a five-dollar bill.

"Thanks. Here's where we turn off fer Lois' place."

CHAPTER TWO

Noone Padden's Sixgun

THEY WENT through a gate and crowned a rise. Before them lay a low rock house with sheds and pens, a windmill tower and a tank. "Used to be a good sized outfit," the boy said. "There's Lois, comin' in." A rider was approaching the house from up canyon.

McBride, the boy, and the rider met by the corral. The girl was not large, not small either, dressed like a man, with a man's sureness and competence in her movements. McBride raised his hat.

"My name," he said, "is McBride. Mr. Sledge, in town, told me you might have some cattle to sell."

The girl's eyes, level, dark, searched McBride's face. "Uncle Jim sent you out to me?"

"Mr. Sledge. Yes."

A little puzzled frown furrowed the smooth brow. The girl took off her hat. Her hair was auburn, not a fiery red, but dark, with a tinge of copper.

"I'm afraid Uncle Jim was mistaken," she said. "He knows. . . . I haven't but thirty head of calves."

"Mr. Sledge said that I might get around a hundred," McBride stated. "He mentioned cows and calves, maybe some steers and a bull or two."

The puzzled look deepened in the girl's dark eyes. "That would be all my cattle," she announced. "What are you paying, Mr. McBride?"

"That depends on the cattle."

"I sold my steer calf," Dave Fairweather said importantly. "He's goin' to give me fifteen."

"Would you like to look at the cattle?" the girl asked suddenly. "I can show you."

"I sure would," McBride agreed.

"I'll go with you," the boy said.

"You go to the house and get something to eat, "Lois Titus directed. "And you'll find your shirt and overalls in the kitchen. I washed and mended them. Leave the ones you have on, Dave."

"I'll do that," Dave agreed, and slipped down from the steer as McBride and the girl mounted their horses.

"He's an orphan," the girl explained as they rode off. "We all try to look after

him. I've tried to get him to stay with me but he won't. He just visits around."

"Don't go to school or anything?"

"There isn't any school," Lois Titus replied, her voice bitter. "There isn't anything in the Piojoso country. There are some of my cows, Mr. McBride. You can get an idea of the kind of cattle I have."

McBride looked at the cows, good grade cattle with big calves sucking. They rode on, viewing more cattle. At noon they were back at the corrals.

"I can give you," McBride said, "thirty a round for everything. Or, if you want, we can class them and I'll price the classes."

"I'll let you know," Lois Titus said. She did not look directly at McBride.

"I'm staying in town with Mr. Sledge," McBride informed. "You can get word to me there."

"I'll let you know, Mr. McBride," the girl assured, and went to the house.

Shorty's running walk ate into distance. McBride passed Villareal's without stopping. Piojoso, when he reached the place, seemed just the same. Asleep, apparently deserted. Sunday, McBride thought. He had not remembered the day. He put Shorty's reins over the hitch-rack in front of Sledge's store.

Sledge was busy. He had a can of paint, a brush and a stack of cardboard squares. The storekeeper looked up as McBride entered. "Buy them cattle?" he demanded.

"I don't know yet," McBride said. "Maybe. Why didn't you tell me that was a girl? You said, 'Lewis.' "

"Sure. That's her name."

"Lois is her name. You want to learn to speak plain. What are you goin' to have? A sale?"

The sign Sledge was working on read: Tomatoes, 15c a. . . .

"Maybe. Anyhow, I'm tired of Norwood settin' my prices. You can put your horse out back in my shed. I got some feed."

"Thanks." McBride turned toward the door, took a step and stopped. Curly was standing in the doorway.

Curly's face showed signs of wear. Curly's lips were puffed and bruised and there was a discolored spot high on the cheekbone.

"Say," said Curly, "do you want to buy a saloon?"

"I buy cattle," McBride said. "What happened to you?"

"Noone Padden happened to me," Curly snapped. "I shot off my big mouth when I said it was too bad you hadn't killed Reeder last night. I'll sell cheap."

"A MAN that runs a saloon," McBride stated, "ought to be able to look after himself. I ain't interested in saloons." His voice was cold.

"You don't do much fightin' when one man holds a gun on you an' the other beats you up," Curly growled. "You stand still an' take it."

"An' don't do anything about it afterwards." Contempt in McBride's drawl. "Crawl under your bed if you're afraid."

"I ain't—" Curly began. Steps sounded on the porch. Curly moved quickly from the doorway. Jim Sledge's hands disappeared under the counter. Two men came through the door.

One of the two was the blond youth, Reeder Norwood; the other was a big man, bulky, hard face pitted with smallpox scars, eyes small and close set.

"That's him, Noone," Reeder snarled. "That's the feller that slugged me from behind."

"We been waitin' for you, mister," the big man growled. "People don't come into Piojoso an' hit a man from behind an' get away with it. You're—" He broke off. He was staring into the muzzle of the Bisley Colt.

"People don't come walkin' in an' beat me up, neither," McBride said pleasantly. "Stand still. You, too, Blondy. Stay right together. I like to look at both of you."

The Colt made a little circling movement. Noone Padden and Reeder Norwood stood still.

"Look here," Padden blustered. "I'm a deputy sheriff. You can't—"

"You're a deputy skunk!" McBride's voice carried a snap and a ring that was unmistakable. "You've beat up a man for doin' somethin' he couldn't help. We'll see how it works on you. Take that gun off him, Curly. Go behind him an' get it."

Like a man in a daze Curly moved to obey. "Throw it out the door!" McBride ordered. "No. Leave Blondy's alone. He ain't dangerous."

The gun thumped on the porch. Curly came back from the door.

"Now," McBride ordered, "slap his face.

Slap it hard. He hit you when you were under a gun, didn't he? Let's see how well you can do it!"

"I don't want to," Curly said. "I ain't sore at you, Noone. I ain't—"

"You damned coward!" McBride spat out the words. "You come in here wantin' to sell out. You're scared of your shadow. Hit him!" The Bisley Colt swung to cover Curly.

"You hit me, Curly, and' I'll—"

"Shut up, you! Hit him, Curly. Hit him in the face!"

Curly half lifted his hand. Lowered it again. "I ain't goin' to," he said. "I won't."

McBride holstered the Colt. "Yellow," he said. "You had your chance. Get out! You, too!" His eyes centered on Padden's. "All three of you."

He took a step and Curly backed away. McBride took a second step and Curly went through the door. Padden, his face white under the tan, said: "You got my gun. You—"

"It's on the porch," McBride snapped. "Walk out. Pick it up. Try to use it!"

"Come on, Noone." Reeder Norwood caught Padden's arm, pulling him. "Come on!" For an instant Padden rebelled against the pull and then, giving way, went through the door. McBride followed. The two men crossed the porch, on across the street, through the door of Norwood's store.

McBride picked up Padden's gun and came back. He put the gun on the counter. Jim Sledge was finishing his sign. "Can" he finished with a flourish. "There," he said, and stood back to survey his handiwork, "that ought to do. You was a little hard on Curly, McBride."

"He's a gutless wonder," McBride said.

"Nope. He's been here quite a while, that's all. Some thing get to be a habit."

"Like knucklin' under to a bully?" How come you ain't infected?"

"Maybe I am." Sledge's voice was dry. "I wonder why Norwood didn't come hims'elf?"

"You don't," said McBride, "play your ace when you think the bowers will take the trick. You ain't a damn' bit scared, Sledge."

Sledge put the sign by the tomato cans. "There," he said. "An' that still leaves me

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a nice profit. I believe you're right about competition, McBride. It ought to be good for business."

He picked up a shotgun from under the counter and, cradling it familiarly, stumped toward the rear door.

McBride's eyes crinkled and the corners of his mouth drew down in a sardonic grin. He would bet that old Jim Sledge hadn't lost that leg to a sawmill or by falling off a haystack. Shotgun, likely, or maybe a rifle slug.

"I'm scared to death," Sledge said, pushing the door open.

"Don't jump if I say, 'Boo!' " McBride advised.

MONDAY morning McBride did not ride. He stayed in the store, watching Jim Sledge. Old Jim was not particularly active but when he did move, he took the shotgun with him. There was no trade, none at all. Two wagons stopped at Norwood's but their occupants did not come to Sledge's. A rider stopped at Curly's saloon and then went on again. About ten o'clock a buckboard came into town.

"Mail," Sledge announced. "I'll go see if I got any." He took the shotgun and crossed the street. When he came back he had a bundle of newspapers and a letter. "Advertisin'," he said. "Want to read the paper?" He tossed an *El Paso Record* to McBride.

McBride read the paper. An hour passed. A horse pulled up in front of Sledge's store. Lois Titus came in.

"I've decided to sell you my cattle, Mr. McBride," she announced. "I'll take the flat price you offered: thirty dollars a round."

McBride slid down from the counter. "That's fine," he stated. "I can go back with you this afternoon. Tomorrow I'll receive 'em."

The girl flushed, hesitated an instant. Then: "Could you pay me half now?" she asked. "I've got an even hundred head. I'd like— If you could pay me part, it would save me a trip to town."

"Sure. Excuse me a minute."

He walked back to the living quarters. As he removed money from his belt he could hear Jim Sledge talking. It was impossible to make out the words.

"Here you are," McBride said, returning, money in his hands. "There's fifteen hundred dollars. I'll make out a receipt for it."

The girl's hands trembled as she took bills.

"Count it," Sledge advised. "I got a pen an' ink someplace. I'll find 'em." He stumped along behind the counter. The girl counted currency.

"Fifteen hundred, right?" McBride said when the counting was finished. "Here's the receipt form made out. You can sign it."

Lois Titus read through the receipt, signed her name, gave the pen to Sledge. "You eat dinner with us, Lois," Sledge said. "I'm goin' to cook it right away."

"I've some business—" Lois hesitated. "I—yes, I'll eat dinner with you, Uncle Jim." She thrust the roll of bills into a pocket of her levis, stared at McBride for an instant, then hurried to the door. McBride and Jim Sledge watched her cross the street and enter Norwood's.

"Nice girl," McBride said.

"Mighty nice." Sledge's voice was drawling, absent-minded. "Lost her folks sometime back an' tried to make things go herself. It's been hard sleddin'."

"I expect."

"She went away to school. Come back here intendin' to teach. We was goin' to set up a little one-room school here in Piojoso. Then her daddy got kilt by a horse an' her mother just pined off an' died."

"And what happened to the school idea?"

"It died, too. 'Tend store awhile, McBride. I'm goin' to get dinner."

McBride seated himself on the counter. The El Paso paper had lost its flavor. He watched the street. Lois Titus appeared at Norwood's door. From the way she walked as she crossed the street, she was very angry. "That Reeder Norwood!" she said, letting the screen slam. "That—"

"I'll talk to Reeder," McBride said, and came to his feet.

"No!" Alarm filled Lois Titus' face. "Please don't. It wasn't anything. Please, Mr. McBride." She held out her hand to detain him.

Jim Sledge came into the store. "Where do you think you're goin', McBride?" he asked.

"Across the street."

"No!" the girl's voice was sharp.

"You damn' fool! What for?"

"Reeder Norwood—" McBride began.

"You leave Reeder alone!" command in Sledge's voice. "You're a cow-buyer, remember? Come on an' eat. It's ready."

"Please, Mr. McBride," Lois said. "Please." Her hand was on his arm. McBride hesitated, then reluctantly moved toward the living quarters.

The meal was silent. Twice Jim Sledge started to speak, then thought better of it. They had finished eating and were drinking a final cup of coffee when steps sounded in the store.

"Customer," Sledge said, and went out.

He returned within brief seconds. "Man out there wants to see you, Lewis," he announced. "Says it's important."

The girl got up as Sledge sat down. She was gone for perhaps ten minutes. When she returned, her face was white. McBride eyed her curiously but she said nothing and Sledge had no comment.

"I'll saddle up and we'll go," McBride said. "It'll be all right for me to come down this evenin'? I won't put you out?"

"Certainly not." Lois' voice was stiff. "You can stay in the bunkhouse, Mr. McBride."

"I'll go with you," Sledge announced. "You wrangle my horse, McBride. He's in the little pasture an'—"

"I don't need you, Uncle Jim," Lois said. "I can take care of myself, and this is a business matter between Mr. McBride and me."

Sledge sat down again. "Go on then," he growled. "You can get the Villareal boys to help you move them cattle, McBride."

When Shorty was saddled McBride found that the girl had brought her horse around. They rode off side by side, passing the back of the saloon. The girl's horse was gaited and kept abreast of Shorty's running walk.

For a time McBride said nothing and Lois, too, was silent. Then: "Mr. Sledge seems to think a lot of you," said McBride.

"He was a friend of Dad's." The girl was abstract. She was thinking.

"He's a pretty salty old man," McBride ventured.

"Uncle Jim? When I was a little girl he was the sheriff. I remember sitting on his lap and playing with his star."

"How did he lose his leg?" McBride was trying to make conversation.

"That happened when I was six years old," Lois said. "I've heard Dad tell about it. Uncle Jim had arrested some men and had them in jail. A crowd came to lynch them. Uncle Jim was alone. There was a fight and he was shot. The doctor amputated his leg."

"And now he runs a little store in Piojoso," McBride drawled. "That's a comedown."

"Uncle Jim never had much money," the girl said. "The store makes his living. Everybody trades with him—when they can. But he can't give much credit and—"

"An' Norwood gets the business," McBride completed. "How long has Norwood been around?"

"Not long. He came while I was away at school. He bought a place and put up the store and the wagon yard."

"Ummmm," McBride said.

CHAPTER THREE

Clear Leather!

SILENCE again save for the plop of horses' hoofs in dust. They were at the lip of the mesa now, the broken country below them. Lois Titus reined in suddenly. McBride also checked and the girl swung her horse to confront him. "I'm not going to sell you my cattle, Mr. McBride," she announced. "I've been thinking it over."

"You've changed your mind?" McBride drawled.

"I have." The girl brought the roll of bills from her pocket. "Here. Take this and give me the receipt. Go away. Don't go back to Piojoso. Go away—somewhere a long way off."

McBride made no movement to accept the proffered bills. "Why did you decide to sell in the first place?" he asked gently.

"Does that matter? I've changed my mind, that's all."

"Look," said McBride, "that was Norwood that come to the store, wasn't it?"

The girl nodded wordlessly.

"An' he told you," McBride's voice was still gentle, "that if you sold to me I'd be killed. Wait! Let me finish. He didn't use just those words but that was what he meant, wasn't it?"

The girl nodded, her face miserable.

"An'," McBride went on inexorably,

"Reeder Norwood's been hanging around you, makin' you trouble. An' you're in debt to Norwood an' when I offered you a decent, fair price for your cattle, it looked like a way out. So you took it, an' then you got to thinkin'. So now you want to back out. On account of me. A stranger."

Lois remained silent. She would not meet McBride's eyes.

"You're good people, Lois Titus," McBride said, "but I've bought your cattle an' paid you earnest money. The deal goes through."

"But," the girl looked up now, her eyes wide and frightened, "what—?"

"What about all the things I've just heard?" McBride's voice turned clipped and hard. "About killin' me an' all that truck? Don't let it fret you. I don't kill easy; it's been tried. No, ma'am. Our trade goes through."

He started Shorty and, perforce, the girl gave way, swinging in beside him. A hundred yards they traveled and then McBride spoke again. "That old man—old Jim. He was just waitin' till somebody come along, somebody that would go with him. You wouldn't want me to back out on him, would you now? Why, that old man planned all this." McBride chuckled grimly. "An' what about Dave Fairweather? I bought a calf from him, remember? I got to receive it, too. Don't meddle with men's business, Lois Titus."

Dave Fairweather was at the Diamond Bar when they rode in. The boy came to meet them, riding the red steer, playing with his sling. "Let me try that," McBride requested, and when Dave passed the sling over: "I used to work one of these when I was a kid."

He fitted a rock into the pouch and whirled it around his head, but time had dulled his cunning. The sling caught on his thumb, the rock knocked off his hat. "Every man to his own weapons," McBride said, returning the sling to the grinning Dave. "Here, you take this; I'll get my hat."

At the Diamond Bar, McBride went to the deserted bunkhouse, Dave accompanying him. He would, McBride announced gravely, receive Dave's cattle in the morning, complete payment, and take a bill of sale. Dave was entranced. He had his two cows and their calves at the ranch.

"Why," McBride asked, "won't you sell me the heifer, too? I'm payin' good prices."

"I'm goin' to be a cowman," Dave replied. "Some day, when I get enough cattle, I'm goin' to marry Lois. Then her an' me'll run this outfit. I'll get her out of debt."

"I see," said McBride gravely, and shook dust from blankets on the bunk.

That night, while he smoked in the evening's cool, Lois Titus came from the house and sat beside him. Dave had climbed the windmill tower and from the platform was viewing the world. It was peaceful and the girl's companionship was restful.

McBride, watching the boy, spoke suddenly. "No folks. No nothin' much, but he's happy."

The girl nodded. "But he needs someone to look after him," she said. "What will he grow up to be? What chance does he have?"

McBride's eyes twinkled. "He's got plans. He told me this evenin' as soon as he had enough cattle he was goin' to marry you. That's why he won't sell me his heifer calf. But you're right," McBride said seriously, "he needs somebody to look after him. I expect I'd ought to."

"More man's business?" There was just a trace of spite in the words. "A boy has a mother as well as a father, Mr. McBride."

"Some boys—if they're lucky," McBride said. "I hadn't neither one, no more than Dave." Standing, he called to the boy on the tower. "Come down now, kid. It's bedtime." He looked at the girl. "We'll gather 'em in the morning," he said. "Good night, Miss Titus."

Dave came from the windmill. He had descended at McBride's call.

"The big nut is loose on the shaft," Dave said importantly. "I'd fix it if I had a wrench."

LOIS TITUS and McBride gathered cattle in the morning. The hundred head of Diamond Bars were scattered over a pasture big enough for many times that number, and the gathering took time. Dave Fairweather was as good a hand as any man would want but hampered by his mount. Cattle will move for a man on horseback, but only their curiosity was aroused by a boy on a red steer. It was past noon before the last one was found and brought down to the herd.

"Why don't you," McBride said to Dave,

"lope on down to the house? Me an' Miss Titus will bring these along."

Dave was loath to leave. He wanted to punch cows, but McBride was adamant.

The cows and calves were sticky and the bulls were slow. The little herd would not string out and move freely. "I'd like to keep 'em gathered," McBride said. "I want to go up to Villareal's this afternoon and hire him to help me move these to the railroad. Have you got a trap we can put 'em in?"

Lois said that there was a little pasture, beyond the corrals and close to the road, that could be used.

When they reached the corrals the red steer was inside. That helped in the penning. Cows bellowed for their calves which had, of course, fallen behind in the drive. There was dust and a little hard riding.

Then McBride closed the gate. "That's it," he said. "I'll be up to the house in a minute."

Lois rode off, and McBride, letting Shorty stand, looked through the corral rails. For the moment his vigilance was relaxed; for the moment he rested, looking at the cattle. He could, he knew, make money with them. They weren't tops, but they weren't bottoms, either. He could drive to the railroad, sell them there and make a profit.

"Just stand easy, mister," a familiar voice commanded.

McBride turned slowly. Reeder Norwood, Noone Padden, and the two men who had carried Reeder out of Curly's place, confronted him. Where had they come from? McBride demanded of himself. Where were their horses?

"We waited for you in the house," Padden said, answering the question in McBride's mind. "Are them your cattle, mister?" Padden's gun was centered on McBride. Reeder, too, had a weapon out. The two riders had not pulled their guns.

"You didn't bring the old man," McBride drawled. "You ought to play your ace."

"He's here," Reeder snarled. "He's in the house, tellin' that girl where she gets off."

"An' that's his size?" McBride marveled. "I figured you was the lady's man. I thought your dad was tough."

"Tough enough," Reeder began. "He's tough enough to handle six like you!"

"Lay off, Reeder," Padden commanded. "You say them are your cattle. We're goin' to look 'em over. If we find what we think, you're done. We hang cowthieves in this country, McBride."

"An' sure enough, you'll find what you want," McBride said. "Don't be funny, Padden."

"A rope ain't funny," Padden snarled. "The Mexicans around here will remember a rope. They'll know what happens to a man that steals cattle."

"An' they'll know what happens when a cow buyer comes in an' offers honest prices, too," McBride drawled. "That's important, ain't it? Here comes your boss, Padden. Here's the ace."

Berry Norwood was coming from the house, Lois, white faced but steady, walking in front of him.

"What did you find, Noone?" Norwood demanded as he halted. "Any of our cattle?"

"We ain't looked 'em over yet." Padden glanced at Norwood. "We was just ready to. Get in the pen, Joe, an' see."

Joe climbed the fence. Lois said: "Those are all my cattle, Mr. Norwood."

"There's two of ours in here," Joe called. "I seen the brands."

"Come out then." Norwood's face was iron hard. "What have you got to say now, Lois?"

"I say this is a farce!" the girl flared. "I say if you go on with this, I'll have the sheriff out from Cisco. You aren't the law, Berry Norwood."

"I'm law enough right now," Norwood said. "Grab that cowthief, boys, an'—"

He did not finish. There was a solid thud such as a butcher's cleaver makes when it strikes against flesh. Berry Norwood reeled, gasped, his hands flying to his chest. For an instant, for just a fractional second, every

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eye was fixed on Berry Norwood. It was enough. From McBride's shoulder holster the Bisley Colt leaped out and flamed in his hand.

Noone Padden, hit twice in the chest and belly, grunted and went down, his gun falling free. Crouching in his own smoke, McBride snatched up that weapon and fired again. Reeder spun half around, like a weathercock caught by a puff of wind. That much McBride saw, and had no time for more. Berry Norwood, recovered somewhat, had drawn his gun. It fell level and McBride felt the bite and burn of flaming lead.

This was a different matter from men caught off guard and by surprise. Norwood was coming to him, running, weaving, closing the distance, firing as he came. The Bisley Colt kicked hard. Still Norwood came. Again the Bisley flamed. McBride dropped the gun, transferring Padden's weapon. There was no need. Norwood took two more lurching steps and sprawled, falling across Noone Padden's feet, hands reaching out, one still holding his gun. McBride came up, turned, and leveled off at the two riders.

SECONDS had passed, only seconds. Joe, his mouth gaped with surprise, had his gun half out of the holster. The other man had not touched his weapon. By the fence Reeder Norwood sat groaning, gripping his shattered shoulder, blood dripping from his arm.

"Hold it!" McBride rasped. Joe let his gun drop back, and his hands went up, shoulder high. The other man took the example set.

On the windmill platform, Dave Fairweather stood up. His voice was like the crowing of a young game cock. "They're comin'," he yelled. "Ol' man Sledge an' Curly are comin' through the gate." He started down from the tower, the leather strings of his sling dangling as he climbed. McBride looked at Lois Titus. The girl had picked up Reeder's gun and was holding it competently, the hammer cocked and ready.

"Sit down, McBride," Lois ordered. "You're hit. You're bleeding."

McBride sat down cross-legged. Horses pounded up; Curly cursing with every breath, a rifle in his hands, flung himself down. Jim Sledge was more deliberate. He dismounted, stiff on his wooden peg, his shotgun held carefully.

"Curly," said Jim Sledge, "couldn't ketch his horse, damn him. That's why we come so late. Git the guns off them thievin' skunks, Curly."

At six o'clock that evening, McBride was on the bunkhouse porch. Inside the bunkhouse were Joe and his sullen fellow, thoroughly tied. Reeder Norwood was in the bunkhouse, too, lying on a bed, groaning now and then with the pain of his wound. Reeder was not tied because there was no need of it. In the empty feed room of the barn were two bodies: Noone Padden and Berry Norwood.

McBride, stiff with the bandage around his middle, knew how Reeder felt. It would be some time, he thought ruefully, before he wore his money belt again. He fumbled for the makings.

"Lemme, will you, McBride?" Dave Fairweather held out his hand for the tobacco and papers. "Lemme roll it, will you?"

"The thing I can't figure out," McBride passed over the makings, "is why you didn't yell when we came in with the cattle. You were on the tower. You'd seen 'em hide their horses an' got into the house. Why didn't you yell?"

"I was scared." Dave's voice was candid and his fingers deft as he twisted paper around tobacco. "I didn't know what to do. I was askairt if I yelled they'd come out shootin'."

"They would have, too." Jim Sledge sat facing the door where he could keep a weather eye on the men inside the house. "The kid done right, McBride."

"He done good enough, anyhow," McBride agreed." "Throwin' that stone at Norwood—"

"It was the big nut on the shaft," Dave said. "I wasn't no stone. I twisted off the nut an' throwed it. I didn't have a stone with me."

"Whatever it was," McBride approved, "it did the business. That's a good cigarette, Dave. Where'd you learn to roll 'em like this?"

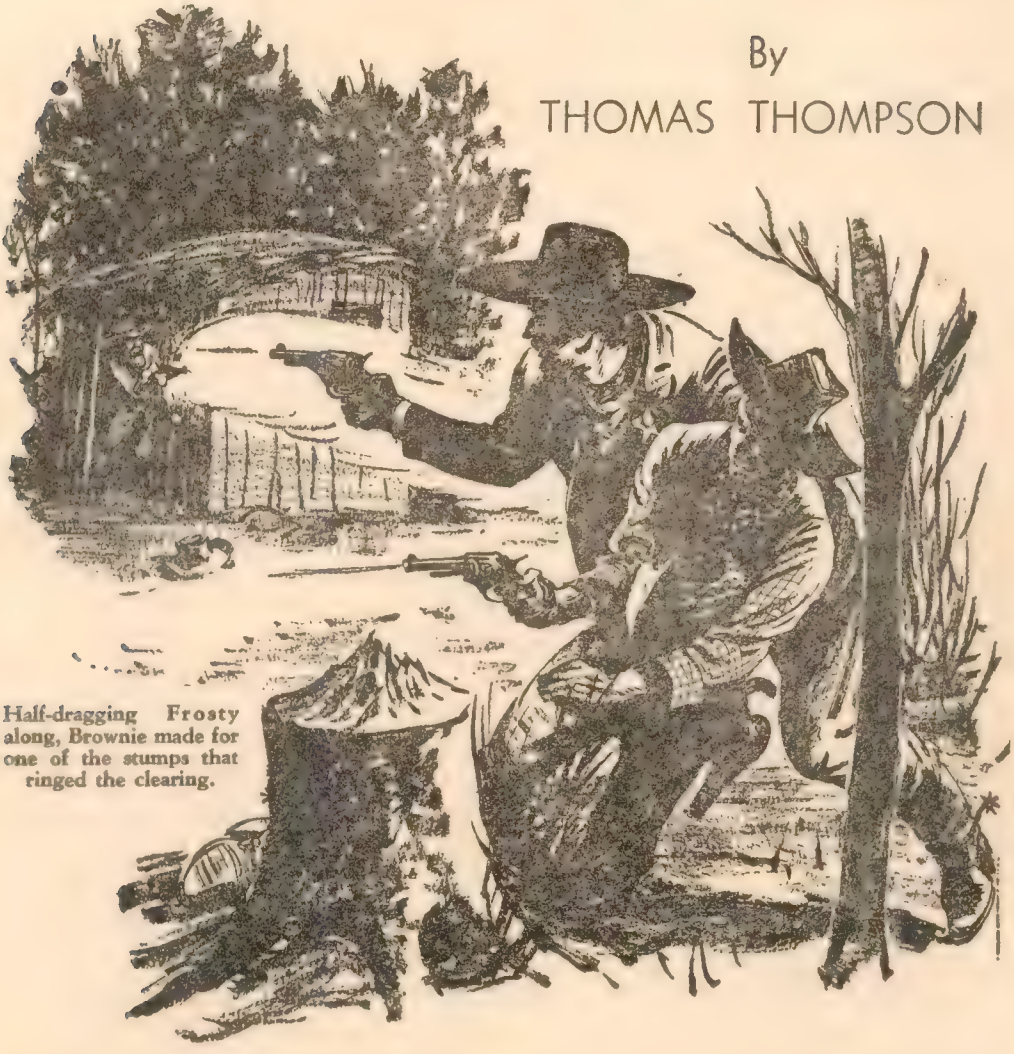
"I smoke," Dave boasted. "I can roll with 'em one hand."

"You'll quit smokin' till you're grown,"

(Continued on page 96)

Twenty-Minute Tin-Star

By
THOMAS THOMPSON



Half-dragging Frosty along, Brownie made for one of the stumps that ringed the clearing.

HE SEEMED sure of himself, this red-head who sat with his feet on the desk, making demands of Acting Sheriff Frank Brown of Alturas County. While waiting he spent his time admiring a reasonably good likeness of himself that hung on the wall. Thin face, nose that might have been broken once, rather prominent Adam's apple, and a perpetual grin that could not be toned down even by the sobriety of the letters that spelled WANTED FOR QUESTIONING.

Maybe, like they said, badlander Gaspar LaTour *was* dead, and his stage-hopping gun-gang in boothill with him. But if those womanless "settlers" in Sunset Valley weren't the outlaw-abidin'est crew that ever needed a dose of hemp tea, then Frosty Starrett would never borrow another bronc—so-help-him-Sheriff!

He cocked his head slightly and decided the poster didn't do justice to his red hair and pale blue eyes. The name on the WANTED poster was Frosty Starret. He had a reputation of being overly handy with other people's horses, but he had made it plain to Acting Sheriff Frank Brown that he was not in town in a working capacity. As he had said twenty times before, he was here as a citizen of Alturas county, and as a citizen he had the right to demand the help of the law. Help in tracking down and bringing to swift justice the unknown blankety-blank so-and-so who had stolen Frosty Starret's horse.

Acting Sheriff Frank Brown held his face tightly in his left hand as if maybe he were going to squeeze his nose and chin together and through his teeth and fingers said, "Frosty Starret, why in hell did I ever get mixed up with a guy like you?"

Frosty Starret had a way of seeming badly wounded. He slipped down in his chair a little. His eyes became sort of sad. There was a melancholy ring in his voice. He said, "I always figured in time of need a man could turn to his friends."

"All right, all right," Brownie interrupted. "Let's don't go through all that again. So your horse was stolen. Poetic justice, I calls it."

"Now Brownie," Frosty protested mildly, in that same hurt voice. "You ain't never seen me steal a horse in your life."

"You are right," said Acting Sheriff Frank Brown, leaning across the desk, affecting a wide grin that he did not mean. "Because if I had you would be wanted for hanging and not for questioning."

Frosty Starret shrugged. "Well, you've questioned me," he said. "You asked me if I knew anything about some missing horses and I told you I didn't remember for sure. Now let's you and me wander off quiet like after that horse of mine. If there's anything I can't put up with it's a horse thief."

Frank Brown lay the palm of his hand against his forehead and said, "Somewhere there must be justice." He slammed his hat on with such force that it came down over his ears. Pulling it back into place with both hands, still cussing and fuming, he kicked the door of the sheriff's office open with his foot and walked out into the dusty street, closely followed by the lanky, disjointed, grinning Frosty.

And as if that weren't trouble enough the air itself was charged with impending disaster as far as Brownie was concerned. What it was he couldn't tell, but ever since old Sheriff Bradford had gone back east to that lawman's convention the thing had been building up here around Alturas.

It was everywhere, all around him. Every time the Kentnor stage pulled in he expected to see it full of dead men, but it wasn't. Every time Chuck Parkinson or any of the Circle C men came to town he expected them to bring news that Chuck's prize herd of a thousand white faced two year olds had been rustled, poisoned, or generally scattered into the brush. And every time he thought of the load of bullion that was about due to come down from the Cat-claw . . . . Intuition, nothing more, but it had been enough to make him keep a close eye on the stranger who lolled around Joe's place sipping beer and listening closely. But you couldn't jail a man for sipping beer and listening, not if he had enough money to keep himself from being a vagrant . . . .

Nothing happened, and maybe that made it worse. Things just kept building up in Brownie like a summer storm until he was all on edge and even the settlers coming to Sunset Valley made him suspicious. But of course he kept that to himself, not daring to ask how in hell a dozen families could make a living in a place that didn't even have a road leading to it. A man didn't dare question the Sunset Valley settlement. Not in Alturas, he didn't. The Civic Betterment League was so all fired tickled about the addition of 'solid landed gentry' in its ranks that it couldn't do enough for the new settlers. There were great things planned for the day when the settlers would bring their wives. But it didn't make Brownie like Bence Fanrow any better and it didn't keep the sense of impending disaster from building up.

And then this lanky easy going red-head who could make horses disappear into thin air had the unmitigated gall to come in and swear out a complaint against parties unknown and demand immediate action. Well, anyway, it would give him something to do.

BUT RIGHT at that second the tension broke. It broke a lot faster than Brownie had figured on. For a piece of

hot lead passing within an inch of a man's nose has a way of puncturing tension like nothing else will. Brownie spun on his right heel and fell full length in the dust of the street, jerking his twin guns out of their holsters as he did.

As he rolled to try to spot the ambusher he caught sight of Frosty Starret hammering three swift shots toward the corner of Mel Straight's livery stable. There was a muffle of hoof beats then and a string of un-nice words from Frosty Starret. Then the town of Alturas erupted into the middle of the street and everyone who had seen nothing tried to outshout the other one explaining exactly what had happened.

The hubbub of voices rose to such a peak of confusion that Brownie yelled himself hoarse, trying to quiet them down. And when some reason had returned he started throwing questions and got a complete muddle of answers. The only thing for sure seemed to be that the stranger who usually hung out in Joe's bar was no longer in town.

Frank Greene, head of the Civic Betterment League, stepped forward, his eyes blinking, his nose twitching. He waggled an accusing finger and said, "This is exactly the sort of thing I mean, Deputy Sheriff Frank Brown. Gun battles in the middle of our main street. Endangering the lives of our women and children!" The clean-up crusader turned a hostile glance toward Frosty Starret. It was a glance making it quite clear that Mr. Greene believed a man had to be pure from the cradle up, to be acceptable. It also made clear that he did not believe Frosty Starret could qualify. He said, "It is getting so we can tell when there will be trouble just by checking on who is in town. A fine side we're showing to our new neighbors in Sunset Valley. Perhaps Alturas would be a better place to live if we hung some of its so-called citizens!"

The head of the Civic Betterment League flounced back into the crowd and when Brownie again looked at Frosty Starret he saw a blank wall of worry that looked strangely out of place in those pale blue eyes.

They went back to the sheriff's office to talk it over, and when Frosty Starret walked straight by the Chinaman's without even noticing the tantalizing smell of frying steak that lay like a barred gate across the sidewalk, Brownie knew for sure that his wayward pal was concerned with more than just losing a horse.

Frosty confirmed it quickly when they were alone, facing each other across the desk. The muscles at the back of his jaw were hard as he said, "I was just trying to have some fun with you, Brownie. Forget the whole thing. I got to be going now."

"Sit down," Brownie said flatly.

These two knew each other to the point where words were not always a necessity. Frosty Starret sank back into the bow-back chair but he did not relax. His long tapered fingers kept pressing against the top of the desk.

"What is it?" Brownie said softly.

"Purely personal," Frosty Starret said.

Brownie shook his head. "No go, Frosty," he argued. "I'm the law around here at present. I don't allow shooting scrapes to go on under my nose. Who was it?"

"Nobody you know," Frosty persisted. There was a faint line of perspiration across the lanky red-head's upper lip.

"And somebody who doesn't want me to know him, that it?" Brownie asked, remembering the nearness of the ambusher's bullet.

"He was after me," Frosty Starret said. "Figured maybe I was talking too much."

"About what?" Brownie asked softly. The hair was beginning to crawl along the back of his neck. His sixth sense told him that this impending doom that had been hanging over Alturas for the last week was somehow funneling to a climax through this lanky, red-headed, horse-fancying pal of his.

The red-head leaned forward suddenly, his eyes slate hard. "Look, Frank," he said. "There's some things I can't tell you. If I did it would involve friends of mine. Friends that don't need involving, see?" He went to the door quickly, jerked down the shades and came back to the desk. Brownie had never seen the red-head so completely unstrung. He said, "I can't tell you how I know this, Brownie, but all hell is about to break loose around Alturas. I was gonna try to get you out of the country—sort of kidnap you—so that you wouldn't be around to embarrass some friends of mine."

A cold finger of apprehension was touching the back of Brownie's neck. Naturally Frosty Starrett had friends who had their own way of making a living. The very loyalty that was so much a part of the man would prevent him from turning against them. But had he planned on getting Brownie out of the way so that his friends could have clear sailing on some job here in town? Brownie's voice was flat in his throat when he said, "You better tell me more, Frosty."

Frosty Starret countered with a question. "Ever hear of Gaspar LaTour?"

Brownie touched dry lips with the tip of his tongue. "Who hasn't?" he said, remembering the bandit chief who before his death had terrorized the entire state. "What about him? He's dead."

"Only he ain't," Frosty said. His voice had an edge that did not encourage a scoffing rebuttal of his statement. "Some reward-happy posseman convinced everybody Gaspar LaTour was dead and from then on everything rotten that happened around these parts was blamed on certan friends of mine. Ain't it reasonable that all hell would pop if them friends of mine and this Gaspar LaTour and his gang ever happened to meet up?"

"You'd be making a hell of a mistake if you was to take the law in your own hands, Frosty," Brownie argued softly. "Even with Gaspar LaTour. That's my job to handle things like that."

The perpetual grin was gone from Frosty Starret's face. He said, "It ain't funny, hidin' out like a rabbit for the rest of your life. You got pictures there of men who never done nothin' worse than butcher up a stray beef for grub. Them men sort of lost faith in the law, Brownie. They figger they better handle this thing themselves. I was gonna take you out of earshot for a few days, Brownie, and let it go at that. Now maybe I'll have to use stronger measures if you object too much." He leaned forward, pleading. "Be reasonable, will you? LaTour is dead, far as you're concerned. You get mixed up in this you'll get into a hell of a mess and nothing more. I know what I'm talking about."

"How can you be so sure it's LaTour?"

"Figure it out for yourself," Frosty shrugged. "Bullion shipment going out—payroll coming in. That's attraction enough. The rest I can't tell you yet, but I know."

Brownie got up slowly and said, "I'll take your word for it, Frosty. I'm gonna get together a posse."

The voice of Frosty Starret sounded a little more natural when it said, "As easy as that?"

The fire began to run out of Brownie's veins as he thought it over. Frosty began putting the thoughts into words.

"You've got my word—which don't mean a lot to some people—and a crazy thing called your intuition tells you that something is about to happen. Asking twenty or thirty men who haven't ridden a horse for a couple of years to go galavanting around the sagebrush on an empty stomach on clues like you got is just about the same as labeling yourself a politically ambitious show-off, ain't it?"

Frosty Starret had an uncanny faculty for being crushingly correct at times. Thinking of the sneering comtempt that the Civic Betterment League had for him anyway, Acting Sheriff Frank Brown decided that this was one of those times. Frosty Starret, still not satisfied, threw a final clincher. "Especially," he said, "when you'd be asking that posse to go after their pet farmers out in Sunset Valley!"

It didn't take long for that to sink in on Brownie, somehow. He remembered the feeling he had about those farmers and especially the vague uneasiness he had about their leader Bence Fanrow. That feeling of impending doom dissipated, telling him for sure he had his finger on the pressure point. He did some rapid calculating, then moved swiftly. Frosty Starret, caught completely off guard, never saw the flash of the gun barrel. It is probable he saw many stars.

After that Brownie scooped up a bunch of papers and stuffed them into a saddle bag. He took a rifle and plenty of ammunition for his pair of six shooters and he tied Frosty, hand and foot. By the time he had a pair of horses ready Frosty was bouncing around on the floor making sounds against his gag. Brownie kneeled down, stroked the lump on the lanky horse fancier's head and with almost tears in his voice said, "I'm sorry as hell, Frosty, honest I am. But I didn't know no other way to get you to take me with you and your pals when you ride to Sunset Valley!"

THEY HAD ridden a good twenty miles and Frosty had quit grumbling some about a 'so called pal' who would whop a man over the head when he wasn't looking. But as they got closer and closer to the Alturas County line he seemed to be having more and more trouble making it sound like this was all against his wishes. In spite of all he could do there was a gleeful note in his voice when he said, "All right, damn it. So I'll be a Deputy Sheriff of Alturas County." He snorted as if it were completely distasteful, "But if this ever gets around to my friends—."

"Go to hell," Brownie said sweetly. "How can they hurrah you if they're all in the same boat?" He didn't catch the wide satisfied grin on Frosty's face.

They rode on silently, out of the barren canyon, across the flats thick with sage and Joshua, to where the creek came spilling down, ice cold out of the mountains, wandering off to disappear suddenly in the sucking sands of the desert. Here they turned and rode up the canyon, following the creek, and immediately the sage gave way to alder and the alders then to pine and by the time they reached the top of the ridge the wind was cool and fresh, untouched by the soggy heat of the desert a mere three thousand feet below them.

They paused then in an open spot there on top of the ridge and looked down into the bowl, surrounded by the hills. From a huddle of makeshift shacks a dozen smokes corkscrewed into the air. A distant metallic sound that would be the voices of men floated up to them. There was a steady intermittent sodden thud as if someone were driving a stake. Brownie was gripping his saddle horn with both hands. His knuckles were white. He said, "We've gotta be sure as hell, Frosty."

Frosty Starret nodded soberly. He said, "I still don't know how the boys will take it, Brownie. Maybe it would be best if we just handle it our own way."

Brownie shook his head. There was a near wistfulness in his eyes when he said, "It's my job to hunt down lawbreakers, Frosty. It's not always an easy job. Sometimes I get all tangled up in my own trail and never do find the man I'm after." His voice had a meaning softness as he said, "That don't happen when I'm after somebody wanted for murder. That's what killing off them farmers would be if we didn't have legal backing and proof."

"Guess you're right," Frosty Starret admitted soberly. He reached out and took the papers Brownie handed him and said, "All right, boss. I'll round you up the dangdest bunch of deputies you ever had."

"Be careful, Frosty," Brownie said, trying to make it sound like a command.

The lanky red-head grinned and nodded. "Likewise, kid," he said. Then, "You got my search warrants?"

Acting Sheriff Frank Brown reached back and unbuckled the flap of a saddle bag. From it he took a bundle of legal looking papers and handed them across to the erstwhile suspected horse thief, more lately Deputy Sheriff of Alturas County.

The rawboned redhead grinned as he took the documents. For a second his and Brownie's hands touched and more loyalty than could be put into words passed between them. Then to cover his momentary embarrassment Frosty said, "Now don't get all riled up, see? Give us about three hours and plan to meet Chuck down at the fork of the trail. I'll go by his place and see that he gets there."

"And don't you stop some place to eat and forget what you was up to," Brownie warned.

"This damn sheriffin' business is a hell of a job," Frosty grumbled. "I'm about to starve to death."

It was a mere byplay of words to cover the bloody business that was shaping up, and as Frosty gigged his horse and rode back down toward the broken badlands there at the edge of the desert Acting Sheriff Frank Brown closed his eyes tightly like maybe he was saying a prayer.

He led his horse back into a clump of bull pines and scraping a place clear with his boot toe he hunkered there and smoked a countless chain of cigarettes. In about two hours he mounted and rode slowly down the trail that led toward the upper end of Sunset Valley.

Riding into this new Sunset Valley settlement Brownie again had that feeling of apprehension that had been hammering on him for the past week. There had been perhaps fifty trees felled but no stumps pulled nor any underbrush cleared away. Somehow Brownie got the feeling that this was the way he would do things if he were

trying to make a good quick impression without doing much work.

The dozen shacks were little more than lean-to affairs knocked together rapidly out of limbs, brush and native mud. It was the first farm settlement he had even seen where there weren't women, kids and dogs. These were all part of the things that had worried him. Things that had been overshadowed by the benefit dance given by the Civic Betterment League and by all the hulabaloo connected with the coming of the 'farmers.'

He knew now that the fact Sunset Valley set so uncomfortably close to the north end of Chuck Parkinson's range had been bothering him, too, and there was no longer any doubt but that Frosty Starret had told him the truth about this settlement. His lawman's instinct had seen through the simulated settler's clothing and the trumped up tales of the crops they'd grow and the houses they'd build once the women folks and the kids were sent for.

But you didn't go around arresting men for things as intangible as that and you didn't search a man's castle without damn good reason, even if that castle was only a mud splattered brush lean-to.

He rode on to where the trail came to a Y, one arm pointing vaguely off toward Chuck Parkinson's Circle C range, the stem running straight down the stream to the new settlement in the lower end of Sunset Valley. Here he reined in his horse and waited.

Dismounting he beat the dust out of his clothes with his hat, then went to the stream and washed his hands and face. The cold water helped some, but there was still an awful trembling in the pit of his stomach and something like a fever tingling through his cheeks.

It was nearly an hour before he heard the sound of a horse. He stepped back behind the alders, his hand dropping to the gun on his right hip. Then he relaxed and stepped out to meet the handsome nattily dressed young man riding down the trail from the direction of the Circle C range. Brownie said, "Hi, Chuck, I didn't know for sure whether you was coming or not."

Chuck Parkinson forced an insecure grin and said, "I didn't know for sure whether I should or I shouldn't."

Brownie didn't answer. He took a paper out of the saddle bag and smoothing it against the seat of his saddle he filled in the blanks with a stubby pencil. The writing seemed to be a little wavery and uncertain. Finally he made a small X, handed the paper to Chuck and said, "You sign it here. You're the one that's making the complaint."

Chuck Parkinson said, "This is a hell of a thing, Brownie. Suppose Frosty ain't right? It's gonna make me look like a hotheaded fool, swearin' out complaints against my new neighbors."

"How do you think it's gonna make me look?" Acting Sheriff Frank Brown said weakly. He swallowed hard, folded the paper that Chuck had signed, tucked it in his shirt pocket and mounted his horse. Without looking back he said, "Chuck, all I can say is it sounds possible. And for some reason I never could explain to nobody, I trust that lanky no-good horse stealin' son-of-a-gun!"

THEIR WELCOME to the Sunset Valley settlement was gruff but cordial enough. "Makes us feel like part of things, having the sheriff come out to visit us," Bence Fanrow, their leader, said.

He was a completely ugly man. Short and thick, with no neck and an almost flat head. He had teeth on only one side of his mouth. Brownie glanced toward the alder thicket a half-mile further down the creek, seemed to see the thing he was looking for and said, "I'm here on business, Bence. Sort of unpleasant business."

The muddy eyes of Bence Fanrow flashed quickly then smouldered into a dull stupidity as he threw up a defense around himself. He said, "I hope there's nothin' wrong with the way we filed our claims?"

"Nothing like that," Brownie said. "You know Mr. Parkinson here?"

"Sure, sure, sure," Bence Fanrow said, trying to appear delighted. "And I told every one of my boys if they ever did see any of Parkinson's cows wanderin' down this way they was to drop everything and drive 'em right back. I told 'em we was to do everything we could to help Chuck Parkinson. Like I said there in town, jest as soon as we can get a little money accumulated we aim to build a fence across the head of the valley there—."

"Mr. Parkinson has lost a horse, a sad-

dle, a bridle and a rifle," Brownie interrupted. "He thinks maybe they might have been picked up by mistake by one of your folks."

Bence Fanrow showed the relieved nervousness of a man who is definitely not guilty. He said, "That so? That's a hell of a note!" Then quickly, "I heard tell Frosty Starret is around the country again. Seen him in town this morning—."

"Oh?" said Brownie quickly. "Were you in town this morning?"

"Hell no," Fanrow said, catching his blunder. "One of the boys—yes I was too in town," he said. He ran his tongue across his lips and the pupils of his eyes dilated.

"Were you or weren't you?"

A dull ugly look had settled across Bence Fanrow's features. He said, "I don't know as if that's any of your damn business. I don't have to explain all my business to you."

"That's right," Brownie admitted. "You don't."

A half dozen more men had appeared from the scatter of shacks and were gathering in toward Bence Fanrow. They were a mean looking lot. Standing here now, open suspicion on their faces, Brownie saw that they looked as little like farmers as any men he had ever seen. As far as he knew, there were eighteen of them all together. And then there was the one that Frosty swore was there. . . . Brownie cushioned his bomb-shell by saying, "I didn't come here to find out whether or not you'd been in town, Fanrow. I came here looking for some stolen property. Just routine, of course, but I'll have to search your places—"

A thin faced man with eyes that never seemed to blink took two steps forward then. He said, "That requires a search warrant, sheriff. A search warrant for each house."

"I got one," Brownie said softly. He tapped the paper in his shirt pocket.

There was a dead silence in which a man could be heard to swallow. Bence Fanrow was thinking. Ponderously. In time there was a light in his eyes and he said, "Sure, Sheriff. That'll be all right. Let's start with my shack. Over there." He said it too quickly, and he pointed to a shack that stood a hundred yards away from the others.

The thin faced man who never blinked his eyes had caught the signal and was sidling off toward the row of shacks. Brownie glanced once more at the alder thicket and said, "All right, Fanrow. It's nice of you to cooperate this way. And just to save a lot of trouble we'll take a look at all the rest of the places at the same time."

Bence Fanrow stopped, his feet wide-spaced. He said, "That would be kinda hard to do, wouldn't it?"

Brownie shook his head, negatively. "You got twelve shacks," he said. "I got twelve deputies." He jerked his head toward the creek, and as Fanrow turned eleven mounted men, led by Frosty Starret, came out of the thicket and rode slowly in toward the huddle of makeshift shacks in the clearing.

Bence Fanrow was starting to sweat. Brownie said a silent prayer, then played his trump. "All right, Fanrow," he said softly. "Do you want to turn Gaspar La-Tour over to me, or do you want us to go through those shacks and find him?"

Bence Fanrow was not quick enough to think his way out of a trap. He stood there slack jawed for a split second, then with a curse he snatched at the gun thrust in the waist band of his pants. It was a simple thing for Brownie to reach out and tap him across the skull with the barrel of his own weapon.

But the other 'farmers' had seen the move, and the half-drawn guns of the band of deputies led by Frosty Starret didn't hold them back. A rifle appeared in every shack, and they all cut loose at once. Brownie heard a yell as one of Frosty's men went down, and he saw the redhead dive off his own horse, hoist the wounded man into his saddle, then shoo the bay off toward the shelter of the alders that lined the creek. The disjointed redhead stood alone, then, wide open, his single six-shooter spending itself quickly. As he paused to reload one leg seemed to go out from under him, and Brownie, throwing all caution to the wind, rushed to the aid of the crippled redhead.

Half dragging Frosty along, hammering shots with the gun in his right hand, Brownie made his way to the dubious shelter of one of the stumps that ringed the small clearing. Bark and chips splintered

and sprayed against their faces and bullets chugged solidly into the sap-wet wood. Frosty Starret looked at his rescuer and said, "Let's hurry and get this over with, son. Don't be wastin' so much time. I'm gettin' hungrier by the minute!"

The band of deputy sheriffs had split, half of them circling around in back of the camp, joining with Chuck Parkinson who was laying down a murderous cross-fire from the timber across the clearing. The other half stayed there by the creek.

Brownie offered surrender terms three times before they were accepted, then a half dozen men came out of the shacks, holding their rifles flat at arm's length. At Brownie's orders they tossed the guns aside and came on, hands raised. Brownie looked them over hurriedly and his heart hit bottom. He said, "He ain't there, Frosty. Damn it, he ain't there!"

Frosty Starret's face had paled. He said, "He couldn't have got away! We was watching the back trail out. You and Chuck came in the only other way."

Acting Sheriff Frank Brown was getting sick to his stomach. If Gaspar LaTour was actually hiding out here and they had captured him, any method or means would be forgiven. But if this bloodshed had taken place over a fake search-warrant for a missing saddle—he swallowed dryly.

They tied the surrendered men quickly, and Frosty, dragging his wounded leg, said softly, "Brownie, if I've got you into a mess so help me I'll get you out. I still say Gaspar LaTour is here and I'm gonna have a look-see on my own!"

He ignored Brownie then and gave instructions to his men. They fanned out, each man taking a shack, and when they had moved not over a dozen steps toward their objectives a dirty, dishevelled, feverish-eyed man with a two weeks growth of beard stepped out of one of the shacks, a gun in either hand.

It was hard to say which bullet tagged him, but Gaspar LaTour knocked down two men before he died.

AND THAT made a total of three men Acting Sheriff Frank Brown had to care for there in the Alturas jail. Frosty Starret with a bullet in his leg and two others, who, according to their pictures which had somehow mysteriously disappeared from the wall, had six or seven names.

Frank Greene and his Civic Betterment League admitted they had suspected the Sunset Valley farmers right along and decided not to say much more about it.

But when Acting Sheriff Frank Brown started making out his official report on the capture and death of Gaspar LaTour he ran into trouble. And as usual when in trouble he called on Frosty Starret for help. He said, "Frosty, that business of Gaspar LaTour having his men make out like they was farmers is all clear enough and I catch his keeping a lookout in town to keep him up on what was goin' on; all that tracks out. But how am I gonna explain that I know for sure Gaspar LaTour was hiding there in them shacks? I promised you faithfully I wouldn't mention no names. . . ."

Frosty Starret was stretched out on one of the bunks, his hat over his face. He yawned loudly and dropped the butt of a cigarette into a recently emptied bean can. He said, "Just say you recognized that lookout as one of Gaspar LaTour's right-hand bowers. That'll explain why he took a shot at you that day you was going with me to help recover that horse of mine that was stolen. Just say in your report that as soon as you saw this man you knew something was up and you jest figured all the rest of it out for yourself."

It was a solution, all right, Brownie admitted to himself. It was about the only way he could make it read right in the report. It wouldn't be smart to get involved with all those deputy sheriffs and all those search warrants. He said, weakly, "I couldn't do that, Frosty. That would be lying."

"That's all right," Frosty Starret said, half asleep now. "I was lying to you when I said the boys would go into that thing without official sanction from you. You know dang well we wouldn't do anything to get you into trouble." And while that was sinking in he added, "And I was sure as hell lying when I said my horse had been stolen." He shifted himself to a more comfortable position on the cot and with his voice muffled in the pillow said, "Do you think I'd let some lowdown shiftless horse thief outsmart me?"

The RIPROARIOUS WEST

BY Robbins and Farren

Greatest upset in Western racing history occured in the running of the third annual Rellico horse race in 1879. Minutes before the starting gun, two spectators named Tenneck fell into an argument and Mrs. Tenneck began to belabor her husband over the head with an umbrella. Fleeing, Tenneck scrambled atop his scrubby farm horse, Dumb Head, who was hitched to the family buggy. Mrs. Tenneck's final blow fell across Dumb Head's withers and the startled horse kicked over the traces and took off along the race course with his master aboard, hitting the starting line just as the gun sounded. As the crowd roared and rolled on the ground, it was Dumb Head by three lengths and the judges solemnly declared him the winner of the $500 purse over a field of the finest thorobreds in Utah.

When Jerome Egan, later the famous foreign correspondent, landed his first newspaper job on the Panamint News in 1875, he was told: "Report the news, the whole news, and devil take the hindmost!" Next day, Egan turned in a story about an unnamed but prominent citizen who, roaring drunk, had shot up the town, set fire to three buildings, killed two horses and, still reeling with liquor, attempted to rob a nearby bank. But: "Names! Names! Names!" screamed Egan's boss in a fury. "I want this low-lived scoundrel's name all over the paper! And if you don't find out his name, you're fired! Who was it?" "You, sir!" replied Egan, bowing low.

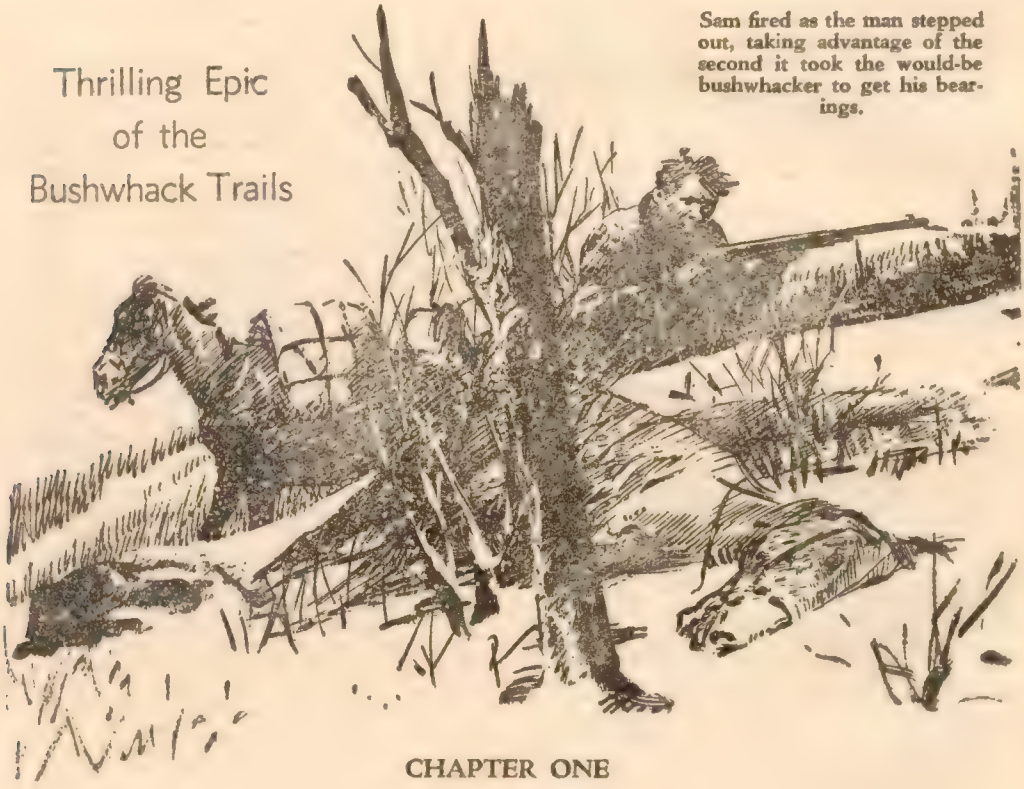
When Lord Willis Barton Moulton-Barton, heir to a 400-year-old English baronetcy, traveled through southern Texas in 1881, he was enchanted by the local game of chance called poker. Trying his hand, he found that he was fairly lucky, but in one wild game in El Paso his opponent, "Lefty" O'Riordan, convicted bank-robber and rustler, blandly raised him the amount of his entire fortune. The sportsmanlike Briton then bet his last asset —his title—and lost. He then took over Lefty's saddle and horse while the victorious "Lord" Lefty sailed for England and solemnly laid claim to his winnings—a royal title, a castle, and a seat in the parliamentary House of Lords.

By 1863, Henry Plummer, highwayman-sheriff of Bannock City, Montana, held the entire county in a grip of death and terror. By day, he ran the municipal affairs of the town with a fearlessly dishonest hand. At night, no traveler was safe from his preying guns. There seemed no end to his greed. He even robbed women and children of such trifles as pennies, pocket handkerchiefs and baskets of eggs. But one dark night, brave and pretty widow Molly Banks gave him his comeuppance. He pointed his gun at her as she walked along a mountain trail toward town, swinging a pail. "Give me that!" he snarled, and Molly gave it to him—right over the head. The pail was full of blackstrap molasses.

HERE'S LEAD IN YOUR TEETH!

By GIFF CHESHIRE

Thrilling Epic of the Bushwhack Trails



Sam fired as the man stepped out, taking advantage of the second it took the would-be bushwhacker to get his bearings.

CHAPTER ONE

Two Swindling Sidewinders!

IT WAS warmer on Second Street, which was sheltered from the bitter east wind by the high cliffs rising behind Oregon City. Windy Bill Edgerton scuffed along the snow-dusted sidewalk, shut tight as a clam. He liked to time his surprises.

Sam Quillen moved beside him, teasing the old man by refusing to pry at him with questions. It was getting late, and just off the long, cold Tillamook pack trail, Sam was anxious to get home.

Windy Bill cut across the street as they neared the Log Tavern, which was a rambling, one-story affair. There was a small office space off its lobby, opening onto the main street, which was used frequently by drummers to display their wares or other travelers wanting temporary business quarters. Windy Bill idled as they came abreast.

His voice was excited. "Make like we're just passing the time of day, Sam. Then take yourself a look inside."

There was a hitchrack on the street side.

The man jerked and took a drunken, grotesque step.

For horning in on that rattlesnake pair of minestock swindlers, jerkline freighter Sam Quillen caught himself a fine consignment of bushwhack freight—to be paid for in hell, with hot lead coin!

● ● ●

Sam glanced at the horses strung along it, made an idle comment on the bitter weather then cast a glance toward the big glass. The place was more elaborately fixed up than usual, he saw, doubtless serving now as a rather pretentious office.

A man sat behind a desk that was impressively covered with papers. He was middle-aged, finely dressed, with his sandy hair and beard carefully barbered. Idly fiddling with a jackknife, another man sat in a chair canted against the back wall. This one's gaze met Sam's and held it for a moment in thoughtful indifference.

Something stirred vaguely in Sam's mind. He said, "By gosh, Bill, it sure looks like that pair of sidewinders we ran into up in Idaho!"

Windy Bill chuckled. "Not only looks like 'em—it is the same pair. Ain't they prettied themselves up though? They hit town the day you pulled out, Sam."

"What the devil're they up to?" asked Sam.

The old man laced fingers through his grey beard and neatly spat across the sidewalk into the street. "Selling mining stock. A hardrock outfit in the Couer d'Alene country, they claim. They call it the Red Eagle Mineral Reduction Company, and they're selling their worthless paper like hotcakes here. I didn't dare to nothing till I'd seen if you figured like I did."

"Well, we'll sure upset their apple cart!" said Sam.

"You're darned ca-tootin'!" Windy Bill said excitedly. He started toward the door.

Sam seized his arm. "Wait a minute, Bill." He was excited, but a little uneasy, all at once. He didn't suppose he'd ever forget that glossy pair inside. They had already proved to Sam Quillen and Windy Bill Edgerton how ruthless and deadly they were.

That had happened two years ago, and in far-off Idaho, but there was no reason to suppose that they had changed their ways a whit. Sam frowned at Windy Bill thoughtfully. It was the kind of situation the old man loved, and in this one he had a special reason for going on the war path. "Dang your hide, Bill, keep out of this. It's a case for the law to handle."

The old man looked at him and emitted a snort. "You think they'd believe us? The others who seen that affair that day're scattered from hell to breakfast by now. Except Lispeth. Come on, Sam, let's go act like we're another pair of suckers after mining stock and have us some fun."

Sam considered it. He knew it might prove extremely difficult to persuade the local authorities that what they knew about Messrs. Gripper and Slade was true. Yet there was no question in his mind that the pair was putting over an enormous swindle here.

He nodded, and the old man stomped toward the office door.

The man at the desk got up, a practiced geniality breaking up the severity of his heavy features. "Yes, gentlemen?" The other man kept seat, but snapped his jackknife shut and slipped it into his pocket.

Windy Bill regarded them both with calm eyes. "Which is Gripper and which is Slade?"

For an instant wariness showed in the suave man's eyes. "I'm Hobey Gripper and that's Joe Slade. What can we do for you?"

At that moment the door opened and another man stepped into the office. Sam knew him slightly. It was Titus Rancy, who had a place out on the road to Windy Bill's. Rivals, the pair bore little love for each other. Rancy stepped over to a corner, looking at the picture on a calendar and waiting for Windy Bill to finish his business.

Sam didn't like it and tried to catch Bill's eye to hush him. If they were going to challenge this pair, they would do better in privacy. But there was no halting Windy Bill Edgerton when he was running a coon.

There was a look of amusement on Bill's face, but his voice had the rasp of a file on iron. "So you gents graduated from road agents to bunco artists, huh? The last time we seen you was when you stuck up that stage on the Silver City road, up in Idaho. You sure curried up your business and turned elegant."

For a moment Hobey Gripper supported himself by his desk. He stared at Windy Bill. Joe Slade slid over till he was beside his partner. There was a bulge under his coat that Sam knew meant a gun. The man seemed about to reach for it, but a warning look in Gripper's eyes stopped him.

"Are you drunk, old timer?" Gripper gasped, finally. "Or a lunatic?"

Sam Quillen saw that Titus Rancy was staring bug-eyed. He edged toward the door, yet Slade moved that way. "Just a minute, fellow! Since you heard this much, you better hear the rest. We've got a nut on our hands."

Rancy grinned weakly, a little puzzled but pleased to see Windy Bill's hand called so fast. "I don't know about being crazy, but that old coot is fuller of lies than anybody in the state! They don't call him Windy Bill for nothing."

Sam saw a look of relief wipe out the deep thoughtfulness in Hobey Gripper's face. Gripper nodded. "So that's it. One of the boys who like to shoot off their face. Play the hero." His icy eyes bored into Windy Bill's. "As a matter of fact, now that you've brought it up, I think I recall seeing you, in Idaho. But it's not like what you'd like to make out. You were damned near hung for horse stealing and got off only by the skin of your teeth. I remember they ran you out of the country."

Titus Rancy looked pleased again. "That sure sounds like Windy Bill! And he's been telling it around here that he come out from Iowa. Even claimed he was a church deacon back there. So he's got a criminal past, eh?" Titus Rancy cackled.

SAM HAD a weak feeling. He hadn't liked this idea in the first place, and now he saw that Gripper had neatly turned the tables on them. For the next few days Titus Rancy would tell this to everyone he met. Whether or not he wanted to help Gripper, he would certainly do his part to discredit Windy Bill. There was a worried look in Windy's eyes, suddenly. He saw that, himself.

Windy Bill turned to Rancy. "Don't let 'em fool you, Titus! Two years ago Sam, Elspeth and me saw this hombre shoot down a helpless man. It was on the Silver City stage, and this pair stuck it up. One of the passengers lost a dust poke he'd probably slaved for. He didn't like it any. He jerked the mask off this Gripper hombre and Gripper gut-shot him and they lighted out."

Hobey Gripper seemed to have regained his confidence. He regarded Sam calmly, even smiling faintly. "You sure are an accomplished liar," he said softly. "You were afraid we'd spill your beans, so you figured to get in the first lick. Let me tell you something, Pop. We're here on honest business and we don't mean to have any malicious untruth spread about us. Since the gentleman there seems to understand, we'll forget it if you keep your trap shut from here on. Otherwise, we'll have to take steps to protect ourselves."

Windy Bill drew his gaunt shoulders erect and stared back, then switched his gaze to Titus Rancy. "Well, Rancy, I reckon you'll be telling how this hombre made a liar out of Windy Bill. What I said happened did happen. But if this town's fool enough to bite on their proposition, then to hell with 'em." He turned toward the door and stomped out.

Sam Quillen followed, not liking it. Knowing old Windy Bill Edgerton, he knew he would not stop at this. Now that he had commited himself and had his veracity challenged by his local rival, he would do anything to vindicate himself. And knowing Gripper and Slade, Sam knew it was a keg of gun powder.

Separating at the hitch rack where they had left their horses, Sam said, "Tell Lispeth I'll be out, this evening." Windy Bill nodded and put his horse onto the Clackamas River trail. Sam rode south on the Canemah road to where his corrals were located. He had turned his pack string in there two hours earlier, and had found Windy Bill wating for him, restless and excited and mysterious. Bill had insisted that Sam come uptown with him at once to verify what he suspected.

The corral was sheltered by trees and stood between the road, with the rugged rise eastward, and the Willamette. Sam finished his chores, tired and preoccupied. He was worried. He had met the Edgertons on the Central Pacific, coming west. Though still not well acquainted, they had left the train together at Winnemucca, Nevada. Staging together through Idaho toward Oregon, they had had their unpleasant experience with Gripper and Slade.

Sam Quillen, heading west in search of a future, had been as aroused as the rest at the outcome, as had Windy Bill. He was as anxious as the old man to see them pay for it, to say nothing of protecting local citizens from their swindle.

Sam finished his chores and, in the room he occupied in the barn, began to clean up. He had agreed that going to the local authorities with their story would be slow in producing results, if any. It would take time for them to get in touch with the Idaho authorities, even if the latter had any information or design on this pair. By that time Gripper and Slade could have completed their business here and left. They knew that, and it was why they had confused the issue by bringing those false counter-charges against Windy Bill. All they wanted was another two or three weeks of freedom from suspicion. Yet Sam was far from sure that they would rely on that device alone.

Sam returned to town and ate his supper and afterward went down the street to Shep Winslow's store. Winslow ran both a retail and wholesale establishment here in this river town, keeping pack strings on Oregon's poor roads and trails to outlying settlements. Sam had gone to work for him upon arrival in the vicinity. Through the summer and thus far into the winter, he had been packing mainly to the little town of Lincoln, over on Tillamook Bay, on the coast.

His final pack for the season was ready and waiting in Winslow's warehouse. He was scheduled to leave again for the bay on the morrow. As he moved down the cold, deserted street, he told himself that he had had worries enough about the weather, which lately had turned bitter. He had promised Winslow to get this last lot of merchandise through to Lincoln stores before laying off for the winter. From the threat hanging continually in the sky, he knew that he would have to do it at once or it would be too late.

It was the supper hour, and there were no customers in the store. Winslow stepped out of his office, grinned at Sam worriedly, and said, "Well, Sam, you going to make it tomorrow?"

Sam nodded. "Unless tonight blows up a blizzard, Shep."

The merchant looked relieved. He said, "I promised that stuff over there before winter, and I'd sure like to get it there."

"I'll load it first thing in the morning," Sam agreed.

He got a fresh horse from the livery to let his own trail-weary beast rest and rode out toward the Clackamas Plain. Full night was around him now, blotting out the eastern Cascades. He crossed the river finally and turned southward from the Eagle Creek road and on up the lane leading in to Bill Edgerton's place. Pleasure drowned out part of his worry. These rare evenings with Lispeth were what he looked forward to throughout the long, grueling days on the trail.

The girl gave him a warm smile as he entered the kitchen and shucked out of his coat. His eyes moved over her hungrily. He liked the slim strength of her and the sheen of her coppery hair and the lights in her grey eyes.

She smiled at him. "Cold on the trail, isn't it, Sam?"

He grinned. "It sure is, but it keeps me moving, and I get back here the sooner."

The compliment pleased her. Windy Bill sat at the kitchen table, his steelrimmed glasses perched on the end of his nose. He was thumbing through some of the literature he had lifted off Hobey Gripper's desk. He grinned at Sam now.

"They sure make it sound fine, Sam. Bedamned if I don't feel like investing in their bogus mine, myself."

Sam frowned at him. "Bill, I don't like it. I think you put your foot in it, there."

The old man shrugged and resumed his reading, unworried. Lispeth picked up her sewing. Sam took a chair, comfort running through him. Windy Bill apparently had told Lispeth about the episode in town, yet she was unworried. She was like Bill a lot, fun-loving and easy-going, and something to contend with when aroused. Her father sat drinking black coffee and sucking on his pipe with wicked lights dancing in his eyes. Sam knew he was plotting against Gripper and Slade.

CHAPTER TWO

Quillen's Quarry

A COUPLE of hours passed swiftly, and Sam began to note the rising howl of the wind as it split on building corners. Then the sound was colored suddenly by the beat of hoofs. Presently someone crossed the porch and knocked on the door. Lispeth opened it.

Sam stared. Sol Pickering, the county

sheriff, stood there and he had a wary look to him. He stepped into the kitchen. "Keep your seat, Bill," he said. "You, too, Sam."

"What in tarnation you doing out in this weather, Sol?" Windy Bill demanded.

There was no friendly casualness in the law enforcement officer.

"Bill, I'm taking you in."

"But what for?" Sam asked. Lispeth only looked shocked. Windy Bill looked puzzled.

"Kind of wondering about that, myself," the old man grunted.

"The charge is murder, Bill," said the sheriff. "Somebody shot Titus Rancy through the kitchen window while he was sitting at supper with his wife and family, tonight. I checked on you and learned you must've come past there on your way home about that time."

The news rocked Sam as much as the charge. "What makes you think Bill did it?" he demanded.

The sheriff turned toward him. "It just happened that a man come to my office, a little before I learned about Rancy. He told me about what he called some malicious talk you'd made in his office tonight, in Rancy's presence. He'd hardly left when young Tony Rancy came in saying that his father had been shot. I was just over there, and he's dead."

"Who was this man?" Sam asked.

"Gripper—one of them mining men."

"Then Joe Slade's the one who shot Rancy. He must've trailed Bill or beat him out of town. Gripper went over to see you simply to string his rigging."

Pickering shook his head. "Bill, they claim you had a different past than the one you been using hereabouts. Criminal. Gripper charges that you killed Rancy, knowing he's spread what he heard in their office, and trying to stop it."

"That's flimsier than their mining stock!" Sam rasped.

The sheriff shrugged. "I hope you're right, but I've got to take Bill in. If he can prove he's innocent, it'll suit me dandy. Bill, you're under arrest. I warn you that. . ."

For a long while after Windy Bill had left with the sheriff, Lispeth and Sam remained silent. At last the girl gasped, "Sam, they're liable to get away with their frame-up!"

Sam smiled grimly. "Mebbeso. They're a slick and slimy pair. Since they've gone so far, it looks like they feel they've left no tracks behind them. A lot of people have operated outside the law without ever being suspected. They apparently know that Sheriff Pickering has no dodgers on them in his office, and even if he investigates with the Idaho authorities he won't learn anything damaging to them. But there's no question that Slade killed Rancy, while Gripper prepared the sheriff for what he knew was coming."

He looked at her worriedly. "But you also saw what happened in Idaho. They've probably recalled that, too. I've given my word to pack out, tomorrow. I can't leave you here alone, and I can't take you with me."

* * *

Sable black clouds hung over the distant Coast Range as Sam rode homeward, a little later. He knew that a storm would make his trail through those mountains a tough one. At best it would probably take him a week to make the pack to Lincoln and get back. Lispeth had stoutly refused to seek special protection, insisting with the same spunkiness that was in her father that she was well able to care for herself. Sam knew that she was, under normal conditions, but knowing Gripper and Slade for two ruthless killers, he was vastly uneasy about her.

Sam wakened the next morning to a whiter world. He swung the cross-buck saddles onto his fifty pack animals and, in the early morning light, lined them out toward Oregon City. A half hour later he was loading in the yard behind the Winslow warehouse. Then after a hasty restaurant breakfast, he was on the long Tillamook trail. Uneasiness mounted in him as he swung the string across the ferry to Robin's Nest and headed into the Tualatin Valley.

Four days later he was fighting heavy mountain snow on the homebound trail. It had been a grinding, grueling business every foot of the way, for he had hit snow on his first day and had to buck it continually. He was climbing the big hump at Bell Mountain that morning, riding up through a shallow, fir-studded trough. He was slumped in the saddle, lost in thought, cold, wet and weary. and the last thing he

expected was the abrupt explosion that breached the silence of the snow-covered wastes.

His saddle horse jumped, and Sam had time barely to scramble clear as the animal rolled onto its side, blood spurting from its nostrils. Instinct threw Sam flat in the snow, partly sheltered by the fallen horse. The pack animals behind skittered and fanned out, then halted to wait in dumb apathy. Then a second shot sent them scattering again.

There was a sharp *thip* in the snow close to Sam. It was then that he saw the figure of a man ahead, among the trees on the right side of the ravine. He saw the head and one shoulder, then the man disappeared behind a huge old-growth conifer. Sam shook his head, anger dominating his astonishment. He thought he recognized that man.

Gritting his teeth he slid forward through the snow. His carbine, fortunately, was topmost on the twitching horse. He jerked it from the boot and pressed flat again, but the man in the trees was under cover. Sam was raging now. It was a deliberate bushwhack that had missed him only by inches. And the man up there hadn't given it up.

Sam pulled himself across the snow, knowing that he was dangerously targeted. The man was playing it cautious, keeping behind the tree. Sam waited a moment, shoving the carbine ahead of him, setting the stock against his cold cheek. Sooner or later the man would take another look. Sam lined on the tree and kept motionless, his gaze riveted there.

He fired as the man stepped out, taking advantage of the second it required for the ambusher to get his bearings. The man jerked, and Sam saw a pistol fly in a short arc to land in the snow. The man took a drunken, grotesque step, and Sam was on his feet and ploughing forward.

THE MAN lay face down in the snow, which was rapidly turning red. His hat had flown off, and the upper side of his head was bloody and torn. Sam's suspicion was verified. It was Joe Slade. Sam's surprise was only in the fact that Slade had tackled him out here. He had come a long ways for it, through tough, snow-choked country. Yet his motive was plain. They had a murder charge rigged against Windy Bill Edgerton, in which they had been unable to rope Sam. They had selected a different fate for him. A bushwhach death on the pack trail. It would have been easy for them to discover where he had headed with his pack string. They probably had figured out a way to cover their tracks.

Worry about Lispeth now shot through Sam. His knees were weak as he looked around. The shooting had dispersed his animals, but they had not strayed far in the deep snow. Sam pressed his lips together hard. They were going to hump it from here on.

He glanced down then and, to his astonishment, saw that Slade still breathed. Sam stared, in a sudden quandary. Killer though Slade was, Sam knew he couldn't leave him here alive. Slade had achieved a sort of ironic triumph in burdening his enemy.

Sam rounded up his animals, hoping to find Slade dead by the time he returned. There was no change. Sam cursed but found Slade's saddler tied up the trail at the head of the ravine. This would replace his own horse. He got a spare shirt from his bed-roll and ripped up bandages to bind Slade's head. He placed the man astride one of the animals and lashed him there, then hit the trail.

It was well after dark when he reached the little town of McMinnville. He stopped at a livery on the main street. The holster ambled out, eyeing the unconscious man and frowning.

"He tried to bush me," Sam said. "Get him to a doctor and tell the sheriff. I'll be back in a day or two to answer questions. Then put my string in your corral and let me have a fresh saddler."

Thereafter he rode faster, on a fresh horse and unencumbered. Past midnight he reached the Robin's Nest ferry and crossed to Oregon City. The dark streets were deserted, and as he had expected the temporary office of the so-called Red Eagle Mineral Reduction Company was unlighted. Sam kept pounding, out the Clackamas River road.

He rode openly into Windy Bill Edgerton's yard, wanting to advertise his arrival to Lispeth. Dismounting in front of the house, he called, "Lispeth! It's Sam!" He

called twice more, his heart pounding when there was no immediate answer. He stood in a patch of pale moonlight to give her a chance to examine him through the window. Then the door opened and Lispeth stood there with her father's rifle in her hands.

"Come in, Sam."

He stepped into the house, and she went to light a lamp. He said, "Have you had any trouble?" When she shook her head, he told her what had happened on the Tillamook trail. It turned her grave.

"I guess they mean to get the three of us, Sam. Somebody was prowling around here the other night. I turned loose a couple of shots and they pounded off, and I haven't been bothered since."

Sam studied it a moment. "I'm going to Sheriff Pickering in the morning. Hobey Gripper'll have a hard time explaining away Joe Slade, out there in McMinnville all shot up, or maybe dead by now."

He waited out the night there, and early the next morning rode back to Oregon City. He went at once to the court house and to the sheriff's office. He told his story, concluding, "I'm preferring charges against Hobey Gripper, though the bushwhack happened in another county."

The sheriff nodded, seeming a little relieved, as if he had not completely trusted the two strangers yet had been obliged to do his duty as they made it appear. They moved together to the bogus mining company's office.

Hobey Gripper was there, and astonishment and concern spread over his face as Sam walked in with the county sheriff. Sam did not know if the officer noted this, though Sol Pickering looked at the man with cold, level eyes.

"Gripper, this man has preferred charges against you and your partner. Somebody tried to bushwhack him on the Tillamook trail. That's out of my territory, but I'll have to arrest you and hold you for the Yamhill sheriff. Joe Slade is out in McMinnville now, shot in the head."

There was no mistaking that Gripper was badly shaken. For a moment he stood by his desk, regarding the sheriff thoughtfully. He switched a penetrating look to Sam.

"You're pretty clever, Quillen, with that yarn. Sheriff, my partner started for Lincoln. We wanted to offer our stock for sale over there, before winter had closed it in. This man met him on the trail and shot him."

Sam could feel his muscles tightening. He had been prepared for some quick move such as this, but he hadn't expected anything as pat. He saw suddenly that this story had been prepared in advance to cover the case if Slade had succeeded in killing Sam Quillen. It would then have been that Sam had attacked Slade on the trail, and Slade had killed him in self-defense. Sam saw that if Slade lived he would undoubtedly tell the same story.

The sheriff's eyes turned toward Sam coldly. "What have you got to say to that?"

"I'm telling the truth, Sheriff," said Sam, keeping his voice as calm as he could. "Slade was bushed up on me as I came over the pass. He got in two shots, the first one killing my horse. It was just lucky."

"Lies!" snapped Gripper. "Just like the one Windy Bill Edgerton tried to tell. I expect Joe Slade fought back, all right. He was a brave man. It's easy to see what Quillen's up to, Sheriff. Joe Slade and I are the main witnesses against Windy Bill Edgerton. We know their history, and we know why Edgerton killed Titus Rancy. Quillen probably has killed Slade, and he'd kill me if he got the chance!" His eyes glittered. "I demand that you lock the man up at once, to protect me!"

Sam Quillen hated what he had to do, yet he had seen it coming. If Gripper could get him out of the way, there would be no one protecting Lispeth. Sam had to take the step he took now. His hand slapped for his gun and he brought it up, covering both men before they anticipated it.

"Stand still! Sheriff, I didn't want this, but a girl's safety depends on it. If you lock me up, she'll be dead very soon. I don't expect you to believe that. You have to do what seems to be your duty. Just bear with me. I'll try to show you that I'm right."

For a moment he thought that Gripper was going to make a play for it there. He undoubtedly had a gun in the holster anyone could detect under the man's arm. Gripper's body tensed, and for a moment he hung in indecision. Then he relaxed.

The sheriff's eyes were angry, and Sam

did not blame him. Pickering snapped, "Listen, Sam, you're making it mighty tough on yourself."

"I'm not trying to escape, Sheriff. I'm aiming to shove this man's lies down his throat." Backing, Sam moved to the door.

His horse was racked a few doors down. He swung into saddle and headed out the road to the Edgertons' place.

CHAPTER THREE

A Flaming Harvest!

SIGHTING him at a distance, Lispeth waited in surprise. He pounded up. Swinging down, he stared at her and said, "The fat's in the fire. I'm on the dodge. That slick Gripper turned it into a charge against me. I never figured they'd have a story as oily as that to tell to cover Slade's laying for me out there."

She nodded. "What're you going to do now?"

Sam gave her a tight grin. "We've got to bait a trap that we know Gripper will walk into. I hate to suggest it, but your own life and Bill's and mine depend on it. If I used myself for bait, Gripper could kill me and claim he was only dropping a fugtive from justice. Are you game?"

Her answer was swift, reminding him of her father. "I certainly am. What is it?"

"I want you to ride into town," said Sam. "Find some kid to take a note to Gripper saying you've got to have a private talk with him. Ask him to meet you at my barn."

Lispeth looked puzzled. "But he'd suspect it was a trick."

Sam grinned. "You bet he would. He'd figure I was laying for him out there. But he'd never guess the damfool way I aim to play it. He'd like to get a good crack at me, and I think he'd risk it. Will you do it?"

"I will."

Tension was high in Sam as he rode back into town. It was a long gamble and a risky one for Lispeth, if not himself. Yet his only hope lay in a move that was bold and swift. He rode directly to the courthouse, wanting to catch the sheriff before he had launched action. Sam Quillen was a hunted man, yet it was not likely that the news had been published as yet.

Pickering was in his office. He glanced at Sam in astonishment, and Sam grinned at him.

"Sheriff, I want a favor. If it doesn't work like I think it will, I'll turn myself over to you afterward. Sneak down to my barn on the Canemah road and wait there with me for a while. We'll have to swing around so nobody sees us."

"What for?" the sheriff asked.

"It'd be better for you to learn that when we get there."

The officer looked at him thoughtfully. Again Sam had the feeling that Pickering would like to believe him in this squabble, if he dared. Yet the demands of his office were harsh, and he had to meet them. He nodded.

They turned eastward onto a back street, skirting the business section of the town. It was less than half a mile to Sam's barn and corrals, and once out of town they covered the distance rapidly. When they reached the barn, Sam looked at Pickering again.

"Sheriff, I'd like your word that you'll work with me till you see a good reason not to. Have your gun handy. We might need it."

There was a little pepper in the officer's reply. "It sounds like a crazy stunt to me. I'll play along, but if you're making a fool of me I'll take all kinds of pleasure in hanging you."

"Fair enough," said Sam. "You and I're going to climb up into the hay loft and keep our ears open."

They did so, and within fifteen minutes hoof beats sounded sharply out on the road. The rider turned in toward the corral. Looking through a crack, Sam saw Lispeth. It meant she had got her note off to Hobey Gripper. She swung down and stepped into the barn, leading her horse in out of sight, and closed the door partly behind her. Sam rapped his gun against a timber as a prearranged signal that he had carried out his part and was there.

Sam's nerves were tightening up, in spite of himself. The risky part of the business yet lay ahead. If something slipped, it would be bad for Lispeth. He waited out agonized moments. It began to look as though Hobey Gripper were too cagey to take the bait. Yet Sam had banked everything on his feeling that the man's fear

of his own shaky position would be strong enough to bring him here.

Then, at the end of another quarter hour, a horse came swiftly up the road and cut off toward the barn. It was Gripper, riding alone. The man swung down at the corral and left his horse there openly.

Lispeth's voice called, "In here, Mr. Gripper."

The man's voice was easy. "Just step out in the open where I can see you. And drill you if your boy friend gets smart."

Sheriff Pickering was listening intently. Apparently Lispeth obeyed Gripper, though Sam could not see. Then Gripper's voice sounded directly below him.

"Where's Quillen?"

"How would I know?" Lispeth replied easily. "It's you I wanted to see, and about my father. Why did you frame that terrible thing on him?"

There was a note of surprise in Gripper's voice. "Are you serious? As I recall it, you were present up there. Anyhow, he must have talked to you about it. Girl, I've got a feeling Quillen's hiding here. He'd better realize I'll drop you the second he tries anything!"

"It's my father I care about!" snapped Lispeth. "I know he was fool enough to advertise how we saw you and Slade kill a man cold-bloodedly in a stage stick-up, in Idaho. What I wanted to ask you is this, If he was to admit he'd made a mistake as to your identity, would you admit the same about him?"

Gripper seemed to be considering it. After a moment he said, "Why should I bargain with you? I've got your old man cold-decked, and your sweetheart, too."

But I still know the truth about you, Hobey Gripper."

"My dear, something very easily could happen to you. Supposing I surprised you trying to help your sweetheart to escape? In the general exchange of lead, supposing you were fatally hit?"

Lispeth's voice was scornful. "So you'd shoot a woman?"

Gripper chuckled. "Things like that're simply business matters, Miss Edgerton."

Elation was high in Sam, yet there was tension with it. The sheriff had heard enough. Gripper had not dreamed that Sam would do anything so illogical as to return to the law officer from whom he had so recently escaped at the point of a gun.

Now Gripper continued, "And this looks like a good place for it." He lifted his voice. "Come out, Quillen! I've got a gun on your girls pretty bosom. Come out empty handed, or she drops!"

The eyes of the two men in the hay loft exchanged a message. Pickering nodded, and Sam moved toward the ladder. He left his gun in leather, his hands occupied as he swung down. Gripper stood close to Lispeth, near the big double doors. Gripper waved Sam over, with a look of malicious satisfaction in his eyes. Sam's heart was in his throat. Gripper took his gun.

Yet there were a few more things he wanted on record before the explosion came. He let himself look cowed as he spoke.

"Well, Gripper, you've been just too fast for us. Or was Joe Slade the brains? Whose idea was it, anyhow, to kill Titus Raney and hang it onto Windy Bill Edgerton? It was plenty smart."

Gripper snorted. "If you think Joe Slade had brains enough for that one you've got a new think coming! Joe did it, but he had to be told what to do. Just like bushing up for you on the Tillamook trail. The damned bungler. I'm hoping you finished him. It was something I figured I'd have to do myself, some day."

"What're you going to do with us now, Gripper?" Sam asked, letting worry color his voice.

"I'm finishing you, then I'm going after the sheriff. It's perfect. I've got a note from the girl asking me to come here, and there's the kid who brought it to me. I rode into a trap but I was lucky enough to get you. And she got in the way of some lead."

SAM TRIED to shake the tightness out of himself. His trump card in the hay loft was going to be extremely difficult to play. Gripper would use Lispeth for a shield if he could. Even so, Sam hated the idea of her being mixed in with a hot-lead showdown. Somehow he had to capture and hold Gripper's attention till Sheriff Pickering could move into position to act.

At that moment a wisp of loose hay dropped from the opening to the hay loft, landing conspicuously in the manger. Sam's

heart leaped into his throat as he realized that Pickering, maneuvering to get a chance at Gripper, had dislodged it.

Gripper whirled toward it, a sudden tight fear in his eyes. "Who's up there?" he shouted.

Sam managed to grin at him. "It's just an old barn cat of mine, Gripper."

"The devil it is!" Gripper lifted his voice again. "Whoever it is, I want to see a gun drop through that hole right now or I'm drilling this pair!"

There was a moment freighted with suspense. The sheriff was completely at a disadvantage and knew that Gripper would do what he threatened. His sixgun dropped to land with a soft thud in the manger. Despair rose in Sam. They had had Gripper completely cased in. Now Gripper knew that his unguarded tongue had probably ruined him as far as further operations in this country were concerned. Yet escape was open to him.

But the man stood there on solid legs, deep in thought. Then he rasped, "All right, Quillen, help the girl into the hayloft. Then follow her." Danger was written in every line of the man's big body.

Hoping this was only a cover Gripper wanted for a fast get-away, Sam nodded to Lispeth. Gripper didn't know the identity of the man in the loft, but as long as someone heard his boastful but incriminating talk, he was in mortal danger. With a shrug Lispeth turned toward the ladder and mounted, Sam following.

The sheriff stood there, knee-deep in hay, his face mottled with anger at the accident that had betrayed his presence. He obviously was burning to get his hands on Hobey Gripper.

Gripper's voice sounded from below. "Maybe you bright lads won't consider yourselves so damned smart! I'm torching the loose hay down here, and the first man who shows himself trying to get out will get lead through his brisket."

Those in the hayloft stared at each other in dismay. "He'll do it!" Lispeth moaned. Sam fought down panic. They were unarmed so that there was no chance at getting a snap shot at Gripper through a crack in the barn siding, and they had the choice of roasting alive or being drilled trying to emerge.

A silence followed, tense and nerve- rasping. They could hear no sound below now, and Sam hoped that it had been a bluff to hold them while Gripper mounted and got away. Yet there was no sign of movement, and presently wisps of smoke lifted.

Sam's eyes searched the loft. The only possible exits were the hole through which he pitched loose hay to his animals, and the bigger mow in the front of the barn through which it was moved from the racks in summer. Gripper would be covering both. The siding on the other walls was solidly fixed and breaking it loose would prove difficult without tools, even if it were possible for it to be done without Gripper's knowing it.

In the loose hay scattered on the lower floor, the fire had mounted to raging fury in less than two minutes. Smoke whirled up around them now.

Sam said finally, "Sheriff, our only chance is the front now. We've both got to bust out of it at once. Mebbe one of us'll get a chance at him."

Pickering nodded.

They had already pressed to the front, where the air was better. Peering through a crack, Sam picked up the alert figure of Hobey Gripper below. He stood only a few feet in front of the barn, gun in hand, tensely alert. Yet if both men leaped from the hay mow simultaneously. . . . It offered Lispeth a chance, which was all Sam wanted.

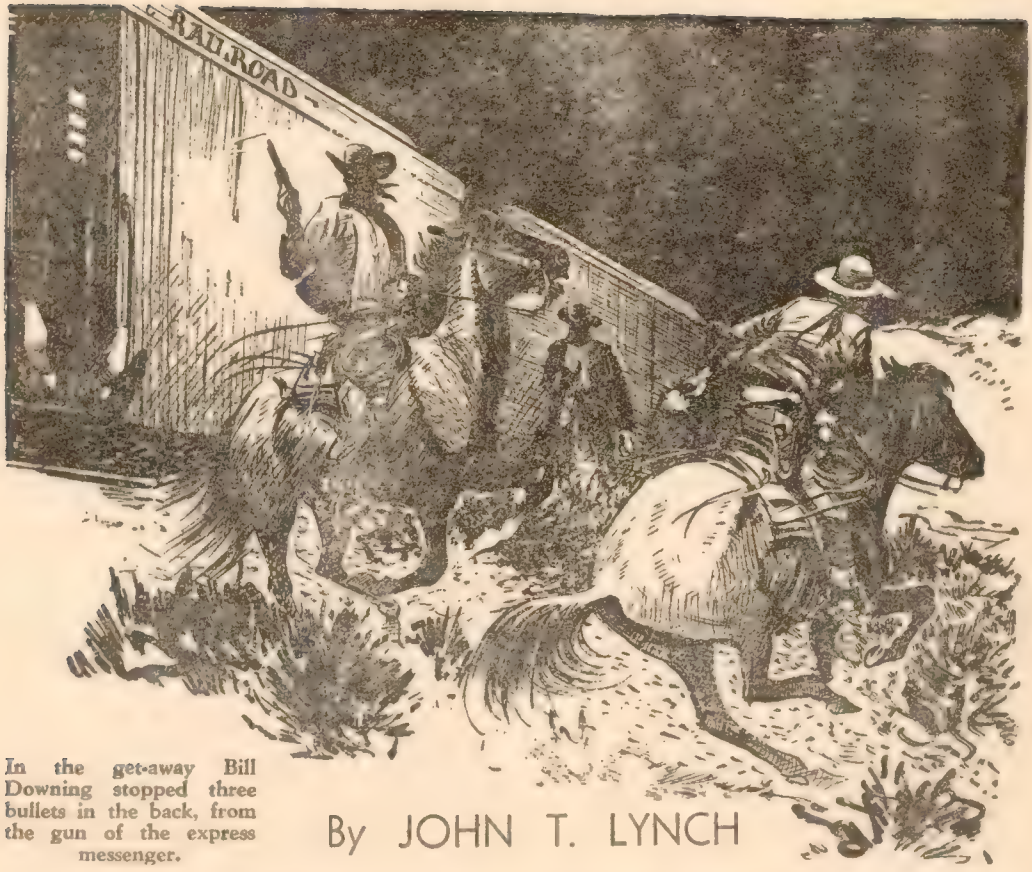
Fire was roaring and crackling now and gases would get them if they did not move at once. Smoke blinded them. The frightened pack animals in the crowded corral were panicked now, milling, rearing against the poles, emitting their deep, animal uneasiness. Sam prayed for someone to come along the road to throw a monkey wrench into Gripper's plan. Yet in this weather, it was mainly deserted and this possibility offered practically no hope.

Sam turned to Lispeth, saying in a low voice, "Stand there by the hole to the manger and watch us. When I signal, shove through a lot of hay."

Lispeth nodded, tears streaming from her eyes, and pushed back into the smoke. Sam and Pickering kept tight against the wall on either side of the big opening. Then Sam motioned to Lispeth.

He didn't watch her but he knew when

(Continued on page 97)



In the get-away Bill Downing stopped three bullets in the back, from the gun of the express messenger.

NOT DEAD ENOUGH FOR TOMBSTONE

By JOHN T. LYNCH

Tombstone's lawless gun-hornets suddenly began twice-killing their victims—just to make sure no more bullet-shattered dead-and-goners would go complaining to the law!

THE MOST thoroughly bullet-riddled corpse that Sheriff John Slaughter had ever been called to look upon lay, sprawled out and bloody, in the dust just behind the Birdcage Theater, in Tombstone. The early morning crowd watched with avid interest while Doc Goodfellow examined the body.

The Doc straightened up, wiped his crimson hands on his fancy checkered pants, and looked gravely at Sheriff Slaughter. "Nine slug-holes in this here defunct gent," he announced. "Plus a crushed skull inflicted with, maybe, the butt of a gun. Six of the bullets hit vital spots—but the crack on the head, by itself, would have been enough to kill a giant!"

The Doc, who was acting coroner, gave the undertaker instructions to remove the air-conditioned cadaver to a plot in Tombstone's fast-growing Boothill Cemetery.

Together, Sheriff Slaughter and Doc Goodfellow walked, in grim silence, back toward the lawman's office. Finally, the

medical man said, "John, are you thinkin' what I am?"

"I'm afraid so," came the slow answer. "From now on, every murdered man we pick up will contain an unnecessary amount of lead. Th' sneakin' killers won't take anymore chances of their victims being able to tell who tried to do 'em in."

"That's right," Goodfellow said. "From now on every body we find layin' around will be extra-specially dead—and bloody."

This dismal conversation took place on a day toward the latter part of the year, 1889, and was brought on because of the fact that three different times, in this same year, men who had been left for dead, by their would-be murderers, had lived to be able to tell John Slaughter exactly who had attempted to kill them. . . .

Buckskin Frank Leslie—of all people—was the first to learn that a man isn't necessarily dead just because he has been shot, at close range, three or four times, crumples into a heap, and seems to have ceased to breathe.

Frank Leslie's nick-name didn't fit him at all. He never wore buckskins or long hair. Instead, he was a veritable Beau Brummel of the West. His tall, slim frame was always encased in the finest of shiny boots, checked pants, Prince Albert coats and white, stiff shirts, graced with large, black pearl studs. His hands were soft and white— as a gambler's should be—and he kept them constantly in motion. This because he wanted to keep up his well earned reputation as the fastest gun-slinger and best faro dealer in the country. He is credited with being the first man to use the swivel gun arrangement—he hired a silversmith to fix a silver plate, with a slot in it, to the right side of his belt. A tiny but solid knob was welded to his .45, just in back of the cylinder. The slot in the silver plate held the knob on the gun; a ball-and-socket joint.

Buckskin Frank Leslie was one of the few men who could, and did, actually shoot from the hip with accuracy. Others in Tombstone, and elsewhere, tried this arrangement, but could not master it; many of them died while trying to emulate Buckskin Frank during the course of a gunfight. It was this same Leslie who killed notorious Johnny Ringo.

Leslie had killed more than his quota of men, in open gunfights. But, Tombstone, being what it was, his derelictions were overlooked. His trouble started when he fell in love with a Mrs. Kileen, who had grown somewhat tired of her husband, and returned Frank's affections. One summer evening the lady was out doing the town with Leslie. The husband was waiting, gun in hand, for the return of the romantic pair. He greeted them with a wild shot, giving Buckskin Frank an opportunity—and a legal excuse—for killing him.

A short time later, Frank and the woman were married. They settled down to a hectic life of drinking and quarreling, in a very domestic manner, on a ranch which they bought about thirty miles east of Tombstone. As Frank's home life was too disturbing to leave any time for work around the place, he had hired a young halfwit who was laughingly called Six-Gun Jim, to do the necessary chores.

One night Six-Gun wandered into the ranch house just as Frank was effectively ending a family fight by filling his dear wife full of lead from a smoking pistol. The dim-witted chore boy watched, in admiration, while the poor woman died, in agony, on the floor.

Buckskin Frank—always a quick thinker—then turned his blazing gun on the Six-Gun. One bullet served to knock the young man down, and out. Then Frank reloaded and sent two more slugs into the halfwit's prone form.

As Buckskin Frank had made a social call to a smuggler's camp, earlier that evening, and had come home full of mescal, he was feeling quite sleepy. Figuring he could just as well wait until morning to ride into town and tell his already made-up yarn to the sheriff, he decided to get some sleep. Not wanting to lapse into slumber with two dead bodies in the house, Frank dragged the young man's still form to the back door and kicked it down the steps. Leaving the body of his late spouse where it had fallen, Frank went to bed and was soon sound asleep.

Although nature had short-changed Six-Gun Jim on brains, he had been given an extremely rugged physique. Despite one bullet in his right leg and the two in his body and the loss of a vast amount of blood, he regained consciousness, managed to

saddle a horse, and rode all the way into Tombstone where he gasped out his story to Sheriff Slaughter.

At dawn, Deputy Billy King, Bloody Frankie Broad, and Ben James were nearing the ranch to pick up Buckskin Frank, as per orders of Sheriff Slaughter. Brave as the three men were, this was a job they had no taste for. They knew how dangerous Leslie was in normal times, and realized what he might be like when desperate. Each man was thinking that he might be taking his last ride. . . .

Suddenly, Ben James reigned up. He pointed into the distance, at a lone rider coming toward them.

"Damned if that don't look like Frank Leslie!" Ben muttered.

Billy King squinted hard. He loosened up the rifle in the boot and felt for his pistol. "It shore is Buckskin Frank," he said. "Now, if either of you two want to turn back—"

"We don't!" the two special deputies said, in unison. "But let's be kind of keerful about this thing," Bloody Frankie added.

To their surprise, Buckskin Frank Leslie didn't slacken his speed until he came abreast of them. He seemed to be in an excellent mood.

"Good morning!" he greeted, with a broad smile. "Where yuh goin'?"

"We—er—we was just out lookin' for some horse thieves," Billy King lied. "Some stock taken from th' Three C spread last night."

"Forget th' horse thieves," Leslie said. "Yuh better take me in. Yuh see, last night I came home an' found that Six-Gun Jim had killed my wife. He was standin' over her body when I got in th' door. So, of course, I had to kill him. Let's go in an' see Sheriff Slaughter."

With secret sighs of relief the three men rode into town with Buckskin Frank, where he repeated his distorted version of the murder to Slaughter.

"You all through lyin' to me, Frank?" asked John Slaughter.

Leslie, unarmed by now, made a move for his missing gun. "What do yuh mean?" he snarled. "I'm tellin' yuh th' truth!"

Slaughter then took the prisoner to a rear cell where Doc Goodfellow was tending to Six-Gun's wounds. "For a man yuh say yuh killed," the sheriff remarked, "young Jim shore talks a lot!"

Buckskin Frank Leslie was sentenced to life in the penitentiary at Yuma, in 1890, because he failed to look in the back yard to make sure his dead man was dead.

NOT LONG after Six-Gun Jim lived to squeal on Frank Leslie, a loud-mouthed and flashily-dressed gent, who claimed he was a cattle buyer for the large Miller and Lux outfit, of California, staggered in to Nosey Kate's Place to spend an evening and a lot of money.

Nosey Kate and her partner-in-business, Joe Lowe, very seldom robbed a drunk in their establishment—which was devoted to all types of Tombstone's popular indoor sports. However, the big cattle buyer flashed a huge roll of currency which the two culprits couldn't resist. Nosey first put knockout drops in the stranger's drinks. Then she and Joe carried him into a back room. Here Kate picked up a beer bottle and crashed it down on the man's skull. Pocketing the money, Kate said, "Joe this hombre is done in. Take him out an' dump him in th' gulch. He's deader'n all hell."

The coolness of the gulch served to revive the cattleman. He crawled to the corner of Sixth Street and called for help. Carried to the jail, he told John Slaughter what had befallen him at Nosey Kate's.

As Slaughter was listening to the details, Joe Lowe, afraid that he might have overlooked something of value on the victim, went back over to the gulch. When he found the "dead man" gone he surmised what had occured. By the time the sheriff and his men got to Nosey Kate's Place, the two would-be killers had fled. They left behind a very lucrative business and thus lost a real fortune—because the man who was "deader'n hell" was not too dead to speak his furious piece into the big ears of the law.

Burt Alvord was, according to his own opinion, a right smart individual. But he wasn't smart enough to learn a lesson from the other two cases of dead men talking too much. . . .

Alvord was such an excellent deputy sheriff, under John Slaughter, that the town of Wilcox invited him to come over and clean up the town. The lawless element was getting too much out of hand.

Besides, there had been a series of train holdups, nearby, of late, and it was high time somebody did something about it.

With Slaughter's permission, Burt Alvord took the lawman job in Wilcox. Although he did a neat job in cleaning up the town, the train robberies seemed to increase. What the citizens did not know—neither did John Slaughter—was that Burt had been robbing trains, as a sideline, for quite some time. He, personally, was leading the forays around Wilcox.

One dark night, Burt Alvord and his cohorts, Billy Stiles, Bill Downing, and Matt Burts, held up a train at Cochise Station, a lonely spot not far from Wilcox. In the get-away, Bill Downing stopped three bullets, in the back, from the gun of the express messenger. The others did not know he was hit until, in a deserted spot on the round-about trail which the gang was taking back to Wilcox, he fell from his horse.

Burt Alvord pulled up, jumped from his horse, and knelt to examine his fellow bandit's wounds. No signs of life were visible. Downing looked like a bona fide candidate for a last resting place. Alvord pushed the still form into a clump of buckbrush, sighed sadly, mounted and rode on. There was no time to lose, if he wanted to be back in town by the time the railroad men had been able to get there and raise the alarm about this latest holdup.

Burt Alvord was seated, quietly, in his office, when he heard the commotion out on the street. An excited crowd came in. News of the train robbery had just reached town—and there had been a large shipment of gold on this particular train.

Lawman Alvord was duly impressive as he formed a posse to go after the bandits. He, personally, led the way to the scene of the robbery, and saw to it that the posse did not discover the secret and convenient trail back to Wilcox. For one reason or another, no trace of the culprits was found. "Someday I'll catch these owlhootin' sons!" Burt threatened. "An' when I do—!" He chuckled inwardly as he said it. A perfect set-up, indeed.

About an hour after Bill Downing had been left for dead, out on the lonely trail, he awakened to his gloomy surroundings. In dire pain, weak, and sick, he struggled, all through the long night, until he came to the outskirts of Wilcox, at dawn. Luckily, the first house he came to was the home of an honest citizen—a rarity, in those days and in that locale. This citizen quietly called a doctor, as well as a group of trusted friends. Bill Downing, mad because he felt he had been deserted by his gang, told the men who the bandits were. They could scarcely believe that Alvord was such a black-souled hombre, but they faced the facts. It was a well armed and serious group who went over to the jail and arrested the sinning sheriff.

Safely locked in a cell, Burt Alvord loudly announced that any man who looked as dead as Bill Downing did, and then lived to tell on his friends, was not a man to be trusted. When a man was considered dead he ought to have decency enough to remain dead!

Sheriff Slaughter and Doctor Goodfellow were correct in their dire prediction of future extra mayhem of murder victims. No killer was satisfied with his handiwork until he had either pumped an extra shot or two into a body, or had, at least, given it another clout on the head. Bigger and bloodier messes became the order of the day. Why take a chance on a talking corpse?

Tombstone would not have made a name for itself if things there had occured in a normal and sensible manner. With their intended victims actually telling the truth, how Buckskin Frank Leslie, Nosey Kate and Joe Lowe, and Burt Alvord, escaped the punishment they deserved is a miracle that could have happened only in the environs of Tombstone. . . .

Frank Leslie was pardoned in 1897. The rumor is that he died in Alaska, during the gold rush, but nobody knows for certain; Nosey Kate and Joe Lowe were last accounted for down in Sonora, still on the loose; it is said that Burt Alvord headed for Canada—after shooting his way out of jail—and then went to Central America, where he married and settled down.

Wherever they are—and it is possible that all four are still alive—they have one thing in common: they had to leave Arizona because of "dead" men who weren't quite dead enough to stop talking.

MAN-TRAP!

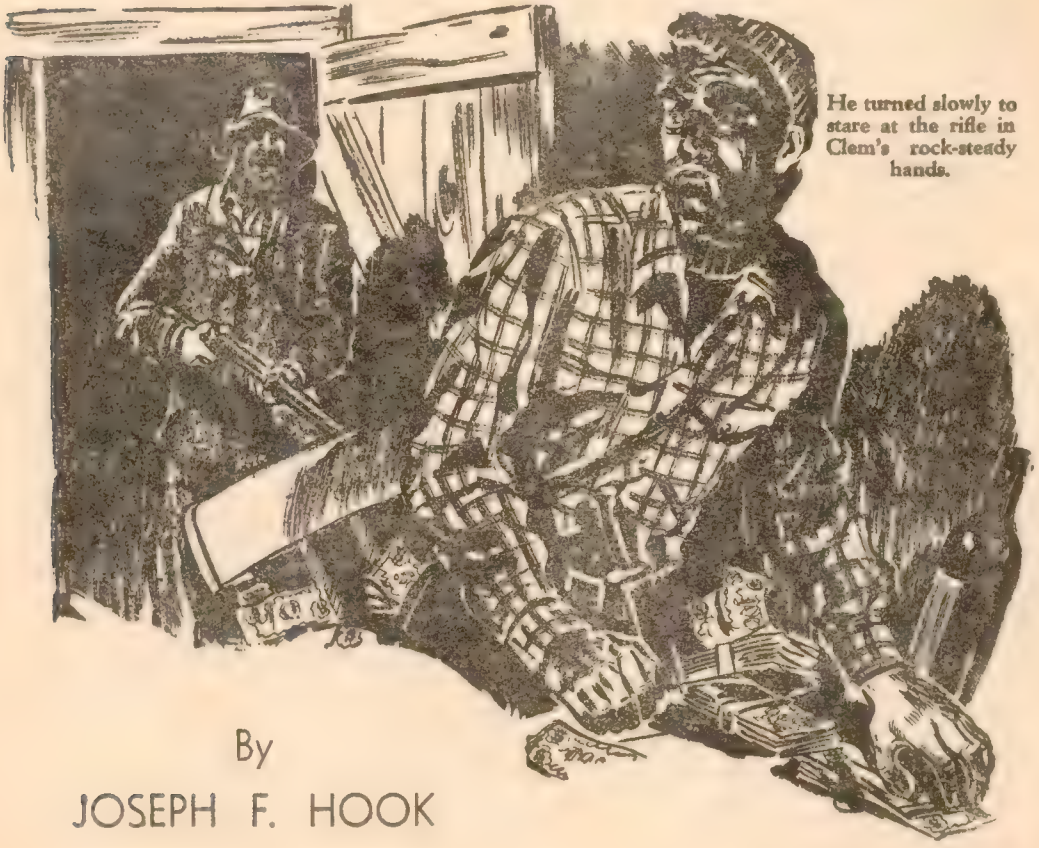
DESPITE his huge bulk, Monk Brill moved through the black Alaskan night with the silent tread of an Indian. Keeping well back in the brush until he had passed the Aleut Bay salmon cannery, he swung around the bend in the steep bluff, then boldly stepped out on the wharf.

An oblong of light beamed from the window of Clem Massey's office. Behind the office loomed the outlines of his warehouse.

Cautiously, Monk advanced toward the window. His lips curled in a snarl when a wharf plank loudly protested under his great weight. A dog seal barked suddenly, awakening the echoes, bringing Monk to an abrupt halt. The incoming tide sucked at the piling with gurgling slups. A derelict boom-pole battered the wharf shudderingly.

At last Monk paused just beyond the light beaming from the window, beady black eyes boring into Clem Massey's back. Clem, a wiry little gent, was seated at his desk, pouring over an account book. Alongside the book was a stack of bills, the daily receipts paid to him by the Aleut Bay cannery

"You Alaskans," killer Monk Brill had taunted him, "are a trustin' bunch of suckers." And salmon-trapper Clem Massey ticked off his last seconds drafting his own desperate kind of rope-law: strong enough to tighten the noose for a two-fathom lynching!



He turned slowly to stare at the rifle in Clem's rock-steady hands.

By JOSEPH F. HOOK

for salmon taken from his trap at Inlet Passage.

Monk's eyes glittered. His huge hands opened and closed spasmodically. Before morning that money would be his.

Monk was leg weary, for he had traveled many miles that day, through swamp, brush and timber, to put the finishing touches to a plan that had been taking shape in his warped brain for weeks.

* * *

It was the end of a trail that had started in Petersburg, where Clem Massey sought a watchman for his salmon trap. Monk's hulking size appealed to him, for reasons Clem explained as his launch headed back to Aleut Bay.

"No trap is safe from salmon thieves; and you've got to be up on your toes. No job for a weakling, being a trap watchman. I reckon, though, you could put up a pretty stiff scrap, if it came to a showdown. It's a lonely job, but the season's short, and I'm paying you well."

Monk soon discovered that Clem hadn't told him the half of it. The trap was of the floating type, anchored well offshore in Inlet Passage. There was nothing to do except pole away an occasional tangled mat of kelp, no one to talk to except Clem and the crew of the Aleut Bay cannery's tender, which came only once a week to brail salmon from the webs. Little to see save water, the distant timbered shoreline, and an occasional tub whale or school of blackfish.

Nowhere to go except walk back and forth on the slippery plank crosswalks over the webs, and that only when the water was calm, a rare occurrence with skookum chuck tides roaring and gurgling through the narrow passage, whipping the water to a froth.

Monk Brill was ready to quit in less than three weeks. He packed his few belongings against the arrival of the cannery tender. He waited and waited. Hours seemed like days, and days like weeks.

A Diesel's exhaust awakened him one night from a restless sleep. Before he could pile out of the bunk, the shack door opened. A flashlight stabbed him blindingly in the eyes as several men crowded inside. The gun in the leader's hand told its own story.

Trap thieves!

"You wanna play along with us, chum, or do I pull this trigger?"

With Monk in his present mood, no time was lost in argument. Fishermen were receiving a dollar a fish. The leader's offer was generous—two-bits a salmon for his, Monk's, share. And there were thousands of fish in the webbing. So they brailed the trap empty and chugged off into the night.

Now Monk was more than ever anxious for the cannery tender to show up. Now he had an excellent excuse for quitting. He could tell the little shrimp a bulldust yarn about being held up while the thieves cleaned out the trap. To while away the time, he laid the bills on the table and started counting them.

He wasn't aware of the shack door opening until he felt the cold, damp air on the back of his neck. He turned his head slowly, to stare down the barrel of a rifle in little Clem Massey's rock-steady hands. Monk was caught flat-footed, the bills on the table precluding any argument as to their origin. Furthermore, the expression of loathing in Clem's eyes assured him that the little trap owner meant grim business.

He drove Monk from the shack at the point of the rifle, after cramming the money in his pockets, down the ladder to the waiting dinghy, and made him row over to the launch.

"I got word that trap hijackers were working this way," Clem gritted, as he bound Monk securely, "and came out to warn you so's you wouldn't be caught flat-footed. I got here too late for that. But you didn't get away with your little scheme, and those damned thieves won't either. I'll radio the coast guard cutter and it'll be waiting for 'em at the mouth of the inlet. I'll recover my salmon, I'll keep this bribe money, and be rid of a lousy watchman."

When the launch tied up alongside Clem's warehouse, he untied Monk.

"I ought to hand you over to the law," Clem told him, "but I'm going to take the chance that you've learned a lesson. Get going, big boy."

Thus, Monk Brill arrived again in Petersburg, by the overland trail, dead broke, and with revenge eating out his heart.

THE office light was suddenly switched off. Monk stepped back swiftly around the corner, and waited. Clem emerged and walked away into the night.

Clem's echoing footsteps halted. Then followed the opening and closing of a door. Monk moved silently forward. A light clicked on, stabbing the darkness, outlining the window of a cabin. A hand reached up and drew down the blind.

Monk sank to a knee, eye glued to the keyhole. Clem emptied the wood-box behind the stove, dropped in the bills, and replaced the wood.

He stepped over to the bunk, threw back the quilts, his back to the door. Monk opened it softly, stepped silently inside, flung one arm around Clem's throat and thrust a gag into his open mouth.

While Clem struggled, choking and impotent, against the arm squeezing his throat, Monk took a length of seine cord from a pocket and bound Clem's arms behind his back, tossed him on the bunk and tied his ankles. Then he moved swiftly over to the wood-box, secured the bills and turned back to the bunk.

He picked up Clem, flung him over a shoulder and returned to the wharf. He dumped him unceremoniously on the after-deck of Clem's small launch, then jumped down after him. He grinned with satisfaction when he turned the cabin door knob and it opened.

"You Alaskans," he sneered, "sure are a bunch of trustin' suckers, leavin' everything unlocked."

He lifted Clem, slammed him down on the cabin locker, then groped his way to the bow, where he released the mooring line. The launch moved silently away from the wharf with the tide. Monk let it drift until he felt certain that the engine's exhaust could not be heard by anyone at the cannery. Then he felt for the light switch, started the engine.

He said tauntingly to Clem, "Now we're headed for Skookum Chuck Cove. Remember when we passed it on our way to the trap? You was steerin' then, wasn't you, shrimp? Now it's my turn.

"We'll pull inta that cove, chum," he continued, watching the effect of his words, "drop the anchor and tie enough weight to your legs to sink you to the bottom. The undertow'll carry you so far out that even the crabs'll have a tough time findin' you.

"Then," he went on, "I'll row ashore in the dinghy and hit the trail for Juneau. By the time you're missed at the cannery or the coast guard cutter finds the anchored launch, I'll be havin' the time of my life with your dough."

When the thunder of water, rushing through the narrow entrance to Skookum Chuck Cove, reached him, Monk shut off the engine.

Clem's eyes followed him, as he crawled through the cabin's forward window and out onto the bow. He picked up the heavy anchor with ease and stepped to the side to drop it overboard.

At that instant, Clem hurled his body across the cabin, striking hard against the wall, causing the launch to list sharply. In order to save himself from going overboard, Monk dropped the anchor with an oath, arms wildly flailing the air to recover his balance.

The anchor bounced off the sloping bow into the water with a loud splash, its rope smoking over the side, humping and whipping like a snake in agony.

The launch immediately righted itself, and at that moment Clem again hurled himself across the cabin, tilting the craft sharply in the opposite direction.

Monk spun around to counteract the tilt, took a hasty, blind step. Something suddenly fastened a sickening grip around his ankle.

He grabbed frantically at the imprisoned ankle, and his fingers touched rope. A piercing scream of terror welled to his lips, echoed out across the water of the silent cove, as the dread realization came to him that he had unwittingly stepped into a coil of anchor rope.

Now the launch's list became more pronounced as the heavy anchor plummeted deeper and deeper into the water, keeping a steady strain on the smoking anchor rope.

Monk's finger nails clawed the slanting deck, trying in vain to prevent his body slipping overboard. With a despairing cry, his body hit the water and disappeared beneath the surface.

The anchor line suddenly jerked taut against the bow ringbolt. For a few moments it jerked spasmodically, then was still.

Bubbles broke the quiet surface, like a string of pearls. Presently, they came singly, then not at all.

RED-HEADED GAMBLE

By FERRIS M. WEDDLE

THE STAGECOACH lurched violently down the dusty road. The driver plied his whip unmercifully on the straining backs of the terror-crazed teams. The stage guard was flattened out, trying to steady his rifle on one of those lithe, gaily feathered riders steadily gaining on the coach. Chief Cochise's warriors were seeing to it that another stage did not reach journey's end!

A bullet caught him and he pitched over the side. The driver lashed his team forward with a brief curse of rage. The redmen were swinging in close now, on all sides. With a hopeless moan the driver threw his reins into the face of a brave trying to swing onto the stage. One of the lead animals stumbled and the stage suddenly twisted and overturned with a splintering crash. Screams of terror and pain came from the entangled team, echoed by the triumphant shouts of the Apaches.

T. T. Jeffords, superintendent of the mail service between Fort Bowie and Tucson, Arizona Territory, took the news of this latest attack calmly, knowing the utter futility of rage where the wily Apache was concerned, especially with such a leader as Cochise. This red-haired, blue-eyed man was known for his calmness, his slow, but sure way of getting things done in hostile country. It was these qualities that paved the way for one of the most remarkable friendships ever to come out of the Arizona Territory.

"That makes around twenty-two men killed during sixteen months of service," Jeffords remarked with some bitterness to an associate. He was thoughtful, stroking his red beard. "I can find other foolhardy youngsters to take the job, but I am not going to do it. This territory needs her young men alive, not dead."

He was silent a moment. "I am going to see Cochise. If I can't make a deal, the mail will have to stop."

He was called a fool for risking such a move. No one believed that he would ever reach Cochise alive. Jeffords did not worry about it. He had heard that Cochise and his followers were camped somewhere in the rough wilderness of the Graham Mountains. He rode alone, knowing that his every move was being relayed to Cochise by his scouts. He rode unhurriedly.

Because Jeffords was a fair man he could not find it in his heart to blame Cochise for his crimes against the white race. Up until 1860 Cochise was peaceful, and his followers supplied wood to the stations of the Overland Stage Company. He and some of his men were visiting agent Wallace near Bowie when an inexperienced army lieutenant put the chief and four others under arrest for a crime they had not committed. Cochise managed to escape, but his men stayed behind, captives. Cochise grabbed two prospectors and went to the station to trade them for his men.

The army officer was stubborn and refused. Wallace went to the chief and tried to talk to him, and was also held. He tried to escape and was killed. The lieutenant hanged the four Indians, never dreaming that he was starting a war that would last for years. In bitter retaliation, Cochise hanged the two prospectors, and retreated to his stronghold in the Chiricahuas.

Now, a lone white man was invading Cochise's country.

The encampment was huge and orderly. Old men and women with children stared at him curiously. A few wounded warriors were recuperating. There was no distinct unfriendliness yet there was no welcome either.

Jeffords seemed cool, and collected as he unhurriedly dismounted, and handed his guns to a squaw. Then without so much as a glance either right or left he walked toward the largest tepee in the camp and entered.

Suppressing his excitement, Jeffords sat down on a bearskin rug facing the stolid figure of Cochise, who had not even seemed to be aware of his presence. Jeffords said nothing, just sat and waited.

JEFFORDS was impressed with what he saw in the great Apache leader, who was reported to be only a wanton killer. No doubt Cochise was cruel, but Jeffords,

Though more than twenty men had already met death from Chief Cochise's bloody Apache braves, T. T. Jeffords gambled his red-thatched scalp that the embittered warrior would pow-pow with a straight-tongued white man!

with unerring judgment, knew that in that great head with its thick adornment of blackest hair, was intellect, and great power. Dignity and pure savagery mingled in this strange man.

Jeffords broke the silence, speaking softly, slowly, in Spanish: "I shall talk a straight tongue, Cochise, for I know you respect straight talking. I want to run my mail in peace."

Jeffords waited patiently, his keen eyes taking in the luxurious robes, the many trophies of war, the bright feathers of countless war-bonnets, that crowded the tepee. He showed no anxiousness, but he felt it tighten his nerves to the bursting point. Everything depended on the answer he would get. Dozens of young lives and the unlimited service that his stage lines would afford lonely, out-of-the-way towns and ranches.

At last Cochise spoke in a demurring, argumentative tone, a prelude to a long pow-wow that an Indian loves. He spoke of the injustices his people had suffered, of the slow enslavement of his people. Cochise agreed that he was fighting a losing battle, but that as long as he could lead his people he would continue. Was not death preferable to enslavement?

A gulf of darkness separated these two, a million differences in customs and tradition made a peaceful agreement almost an impossibility, yet out of their personal respect for one another, they did reach an agreement. Jeffords received Cochise's promise of peace between them with great joy.

Jeffords stayed in the Indian camp for two days, and was treated with every honor. There was gaiety here, yet sadness, too, for he knew as did Cochise, that the Apache was fighting a battle doomed to failure. All they asked was to be left alone, to ride the mountains in peace, hunting unhampered by white man's rules and regulations. Only men like T. T. Jeffords understood their point of view.

Never again as long as Jeffords, who was known as "Red Whiskers" by the Indians, had control of the mail service between Bowie and Tucson, were his stages attacked. All around him the carnage continued for twelve years, mounting steadily to a climax of horror and bloodshed.

The friendship between the white man and the Apache grew, and eventually Jeffords was made Cochise's blood-brother, an honor that was seldom bestowed upon a white man. They often met and had long, complicated talks, and Jeffords came to know the greatness that was intermingled with the savagery in Cochise. A greatness that was sometimes puzzling.

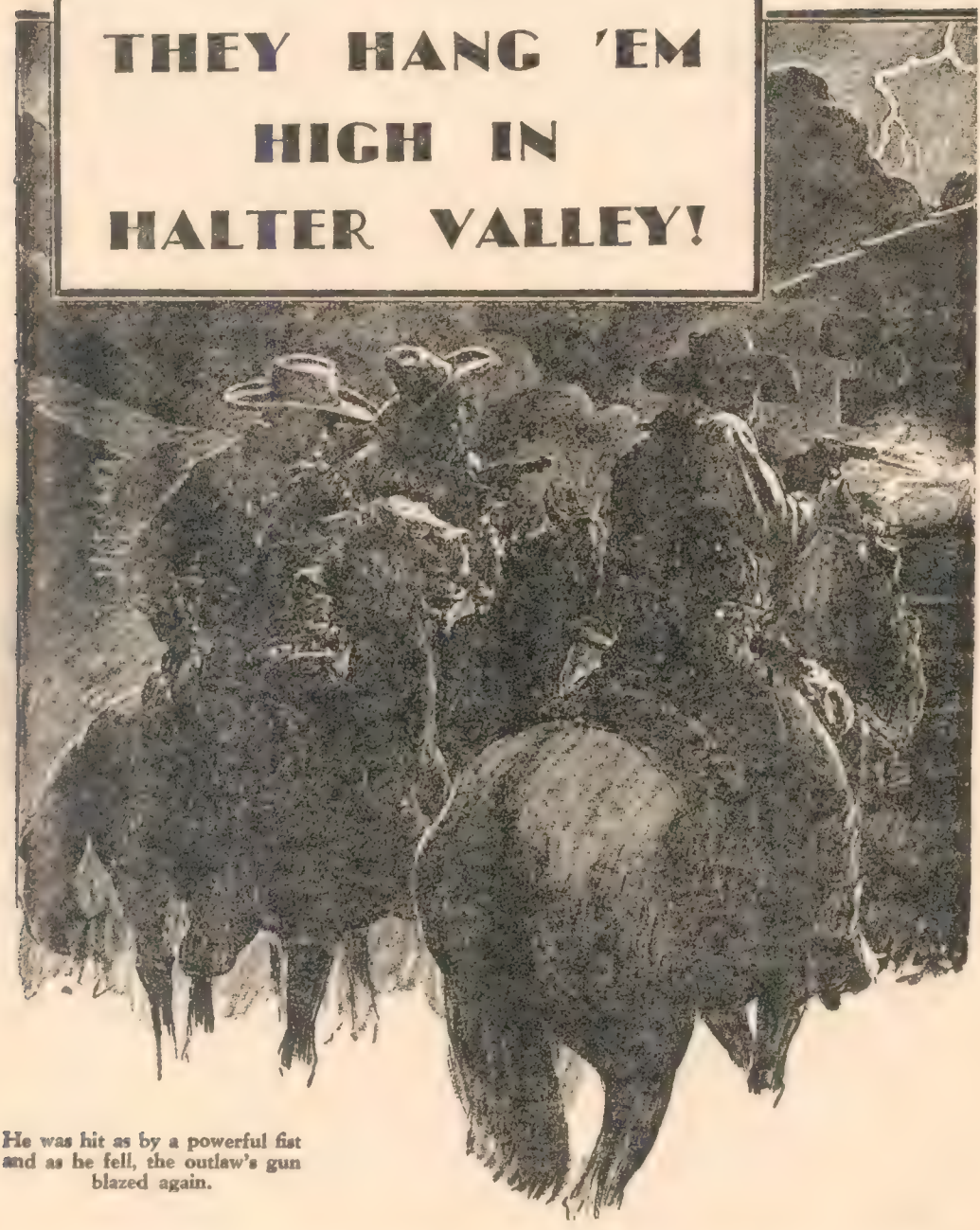
The war against the Apache continued, and it was Jeffords who took General Howard to Cochise to make a treaty. Cochise agreed to move to a reservation if Jeffords was made the agent. Jeffords didn't want to, but because he wanted peace he assented, provided he had complete control of all affairs concerning the Indians. This was readily arranged.

Several years later Cochise was taken with a strange malady. When Jeffords realized that Cochise would die unless he had a physician, the white man rode to Bowie for the army doctor there.

"You will not see me alive again, my brother," Cochise whispered. His eyes were wandering towards the open window.

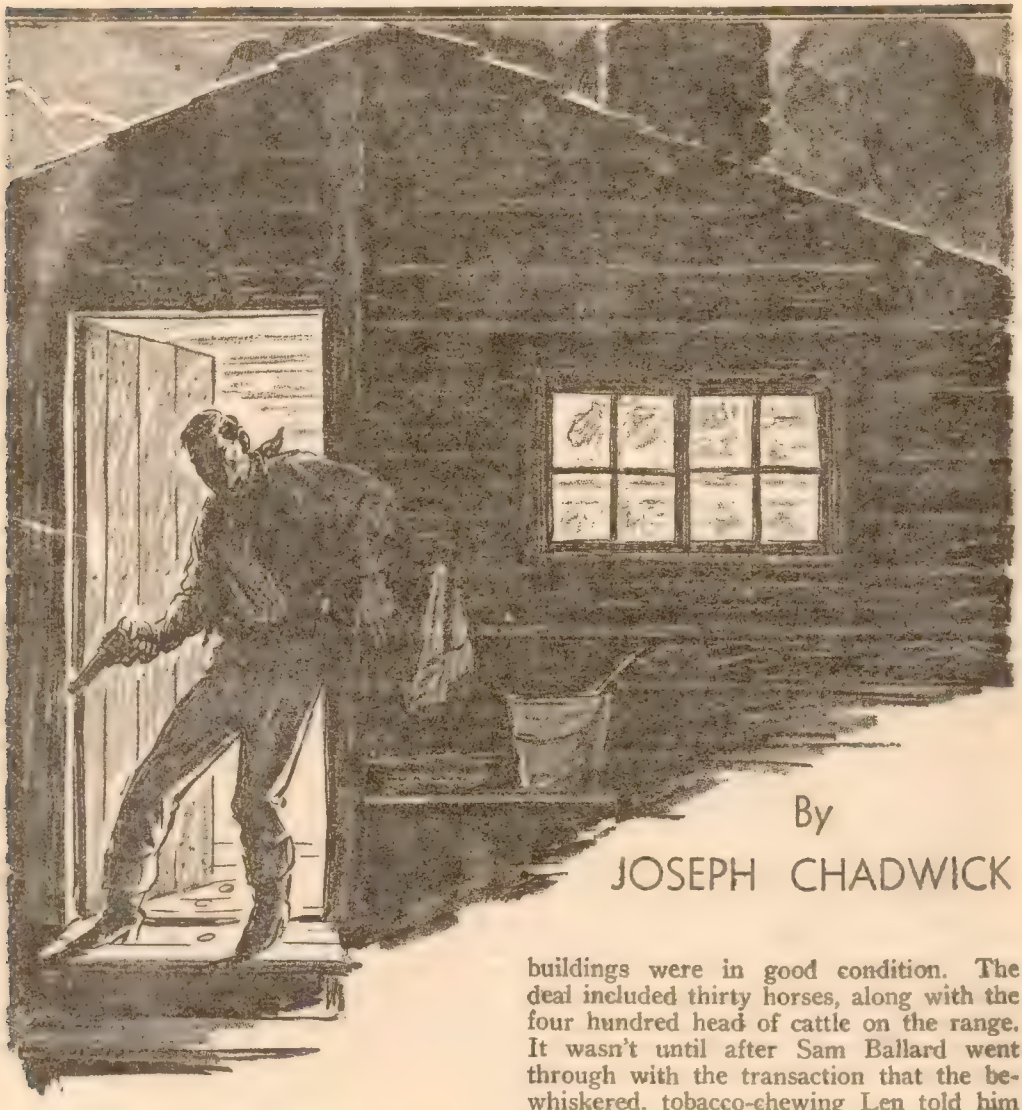
Before sunrise the next day Cochise was taken to the eastern slope of his old stronghold, so that he might see the sun rise over the ridges again. There he died, with the sun warm on his weathered, pale face. There his secret grave is, trampled flat by hundreds of feet. Jeffords knew where the grave was, but he never revealed its location. To the end he was faithful to his blood-brother: the man who had talked straight, and kept his promise.

THEY HANG 'EM HIGH IN HALTER VALLEY!



He was hit as by a powerful fist and as he fell, the outlaw's gun blazed again.

Could Sam Ballard, accused of bank robbery, ever hope to break the strangling web of evidence that flaming guns had woven. . . .When dead at his feet lay the three hardcases who alone could save him from the gallows?



By JOSEPH CHADWICK

CHAPTER ONE

Sixgun Spread

SAM BALLARD bought the Warden place in Halter Valley with his eyes open. He was aware of that old saying, "let the buyer beware." His suspicions were aroused by old Len Warden's eagerness to sell, for little more than a song, a fair-to-middling one-man ranch. There was plenty of water in the valley, the graze was good, and the log ranch buildings were in good condition. The deal included thirty horses, along with the four hundred head of cattle on the range. It wasn't until after Sam Ballard went through with the transaction that the bewhiskered, tobacco-chewing Len told him about the trouble.

"Some strangers been noising around here," Old Len said. "Asking a lot of fool questions. I figure they're Pinkertons."

Ballard frowned. "Why should that bother you?"

Len's eyes took on a veiled look. "I don't rightly know," he said, and closed up like a clam.

After he was gone, his spring wagon loaded with his personal gear, Ballard figured it out. Halter Valley was on the fringe of the Hole-in-the-Wall country—outlaw country. Without a doubt old Len

Warden, like many other little ranchers, had become too friendly with the long-riders who holed up in the badlands. He had gotten so friendly that he was afraid the Pinkerton detectives, if the strangers were that, might find some answers to the questions they were asking. Old Len was shrewd. He was pulling up stakes one jump ahead of trouble.

Ballard anticipated none of that trouble for himself. He could handle a sixgun and a Winchester, and he had a reputation for not backing down in any matter. Right from the start he made up his mind that he'd give no strangers reason to come asking questions of him—he'd have no dealings with the wild bunch.

* * *

The three riders who crossed Ballard's range that stormy night, six weeks after Ballard settled in Halter Valley, figured otherwise. They were in a hurry, though one couldn't make much haste, and they kept darting uneasy glances over their shoulders. But they were not hurrying to find shelter from the storm which so far was merely gusts of wind and claps of rumbling thunder following lightning flashes. In fact, the trio hoped for a rain—a hard downpour that would wash out their tracks.

Ballard had not yet turned in. He'd had supper, washed up the dishes, and now was smoking his pipe by the roaring fireplace. And day-dreaming of a girl. Of the girl who would one day come to Halter Valley as his wife. Perhaps it was his preoccupation that dulled his mind to the threat of trouble. Perhaps it was the uproar of the approaching storm. At any rate, a voice shouting, "Hey, Warden!" took him by surprise.

He rose and flung open the cabin door, saw the vague shapes of three riders. He said, "Warden's not here. He sold out."

One of the riders swore, but another said, "No matter. Stranger, we've got a lame horse. We'll take one of yours. To make it a fair trade, here's some money for you."

He dug into his pocket, then jerked his arm forward. Four or five gold coins glinted in the lamplight as they were tossed past Ballard. They made a little clatter, striking the plank floor of the cabin. Ballard knew then that these three were men on the dodge. He knew as suddenly that they were not going to have one of his horses. He wasn't going to have any prying detectives prowling about his place. He had his gun buckled on—for just such a time as this—and he reached for it.

The rider who had flung the gold at him warned, "Don't try it!"

Ballard said, "Ride out, dammit," and drew his sixgun.

He was fast, but not fast enough. He saw the spurt of powder-flame stab at him, heard the roar of the outlaw's gun. He was hit as by a powerful fist, staggered. Some instinct warned him to let go of his gun, and to let himself drop. As he fell, the outlaw's gun blazed again. The slug passed over Ballard, by the scantest margin. He let himself hit the stoop and roll to the ground in a loose heap. And so saved his life.

The gunman muttered, "That does it. Too bad. Jake, go rope a horse out of his corral."

Ballard remained sprawled there, held motionless by fear but wild inside with rage. It seemed an eternity before the outlaw trio were gone, and he could move again.

MOVEMENT was torture. But Ballard picked himself up and stumbled back into the cabin, closing and barring the door. He was as unsteady on his feet as a drunk, but he managed to heat water and mixed a carbolic solution. He removed his blood-sodden shirt, and the wound was an ugly one in his left side. The bullet had broken some of his ribs, angled upward and passed from his body under his armpit. Ballard ripped a clean shirt into strips and bandaged himself as best he could, and by then he was all in. He sagged onto his bunk.

The pain was severe, and it exhausted him. But exhaustion was good; it brought sleep, finally, a heavy sleep that let go of Ballard only when a rough hand shook him and a harsh voice ordered, "Wake up! You, Ballard—wake up!"

The man had gotten in by squeezing his thick body through one of the cabin's two windows. Now, as Ballard roused, the man crossed to the door and removed the bar from its sockets. Ballard knew him—Matt Graves, a deputy sheriff from Venton. Swinging the door open, Graves called,

"All right; come on in. He can't do any fighting."

Ballard lifted himself on his elbows, despite the pain that came with movement, and stared at the two newcomers. The dark, lank man was Tom Jessup, a range detective for the Stockmen's Association of Southern Wyoming. Jessup carried a shotgun. The other man, Ballard didn't know but guessed he was one of the Pinkerton—or other agency—operatives that old Len Warden had feared. He was a stout little man, ruddy-faced. He wore a hard round hat, and town clothes. He peered at Ballard with pale blue eyes.

"He's one of them, eh?"

"Must be, Keeler," Deputy Sheriff Graves said. "The trail was leading this way when the rain last night washed out the tracks. The buckskin horse used in the robbery is outside, by his corral. He's got a bullet hole in him, and one of the three was wounded in the getaway."

Ballard said thickly, "Matt, what's all this?"

Matt Graves said drily, "You've been keeping the wrong kind of company, Ballard. We're arresting you for that bank job at Venton yesterday."

"What bank job?"

"Three masked men held up the Venton Bank and got away with forty thousand dollars in currency and specie."

"Matt, you're crazy if you think that I—"

The man in the derby said, "What's this?" He picked a ten-dollar gold piece off the floor. Like a hound dog followed a scent, he hunted around until he found four other coins. He searched the entire cabin, tearing everything apart. He forced Ballard off the bunk and onto a chair, then ransacked the bunk. He sent the range detective, Tom Jessup, out to search the barn. Jessup came back empty-handed. Keeler's bland face turned rocky.

"Fifty dollars out of forty thousand. That's not so good."

"You won't find more of the loot here," Ballard said, his voice weak but angry. Then he told them what had happened, how the money and the buckskin horse happened to be at his ranch, and how he had been wounded. "It's the truth, I swear it!"

Keeler said, "Where's the rest of the loot, Ballard?"

"Dammit; I've told you the truth!"

"I say you're a liar."

"You're a fool, Keeler," Ballard said. "Ask Graves here, or Jessup. They'll tell you that I don't ride with bank robbers."

Keeler looked at his companions, but they said nothing. Sam Ballard saw how it was. They weren't going to vouch for him, in the face of so much damning evidence. The tracks onto his range, the buckskin horse, the money, his wound. . . . It was enough to send him to the penitentiary. Panic gripped Ballard. He could almost feel the walls of Laramie Prison closing about him!

Since there would be no one to look after the ranch, the corral gate was left open so that the horses could get to water and graze. Tom Jessup saddled up a dun gelding for Ballard to ride—and ride he must, despite his wound. The lawmen took the lame buckskin along, leading it by a halter rope. They wanted it for evidence. They also had as evidence the five gold pieces. And Ballard's wound. Sam Ballard kept thinking of that, riding east toward Venton.

There was no bucking such evidence. He could hire a lawyer to defend him in court, but Ballard knew there wasn't any hope. Feeling was running high against the countless outlaws working out of the Hole-in-the-Wall badlands. Too many of the bigger ranchers were losing too much stock, too many banks were being held up, too many mines were being robbed of their payrolls. And Ballard gathered, from the talk of the three badge-toters, that less than a week ago a train had been held up for the express it carried. The victims of such outrages were weary of the outlaw element, and were taking energetic steps to cope with the situation. Better to hire detectives than to lose stock and money to thieves. It was less of an extravagance.

BUT Sam Ballard was innocent. He maintained that with all the stubbornness his weakened condition permitted, once he was in the sheriff's office at Venton. Sheriff John Royce was no easy-going old lawdog. A fat, florid politician, he was zealous and determined to make a good showing for the next election. He ranted at Ballard, cursed and threatened him. He coaxed, pleaded.

"Turn State's evidence, Ballard," he said, "and I'll see that you get off with a light sentence."

"I don't know anything," Ballard said, time and time again. He felt sick from his wound; there was fever burning him in now. "I told you what happened."

"I want to know the names of the men who were with you."

"I haven't been in town for more than two weeks, Royce."

"Where'd you hide your share of the loot?"

Ballard shook his head. He was slumped in a chair, Royce standing over him. Tom Jessup and Keeler looked on, from across the room. Matt Graves had gone to fetch Cleve Sanders, the banker. They wanted Sanders to identify Ballard as one of the hold-up men. Royce was still shouting at Ballard when the deputy came back with Cleve Sanders. They closed the door against the crowd that had gathered outside. Sanders nodded, said, "Gentlemen," by way of greeting.

He was a young man, compared to most cowtown bankers. However, his ascendency to president of the Venton Bank hadn't been achieved by his own efforts alone. Less than a year ago, the bank had been forced to close its doors because its previous president had speculated too heavily in mining stock. A Denver bank had reopened it as a branch, and Cleve Sanders's family owned that Denver institution. A handsome blond man, Sanders had quickly become one of Venton's leading citizens. Sam Ballard had gotten to know him fairly well—because both had been courting the same girl. The two of them had become, in a way, friendly enemies.

Sheriff Royce said, "Take a good look at him, Sanders."

Sanders nodded. His expression was grave, his eyes uneasy. He said slowly, "Sam, I'm sorry."

Ballard's hands gripped the arms of his chair. "Sorry for what?"

Sanders said, "That I have to identify you."

Ballard's mouth fell agape. A strangling sound came from his throat. Jessup and Graves exchanged a look that had a mild surprise in it. Keeler took off his hard hat, ran his forefinger around its sweatband. He stared at Cleve Sanders. Eager though he had been, Sheriff Royce now said, "Be sure of it, Sanders. Remember; those hold-up men were masked."

The young banker nodded. "I'm being careful," he said. "They were masked, and they weren't in the bank long. They caught me and Jeb Marvin, my teller, going over the books, just at closing time. Jeb reached for a gun he kept under the counter, but one of the three hit him with a gun butt. I was scared, seeing Jeb going down. I threw up my hands and turned my back to the wall." He paused, frowning. "But I'm sure the man who gun-whipped old Jeb was—Ballard."

* * *

They locked Sam Ballard in a jail cell, holding him for court. They didn't bring old Jeb Marvin in to identify him because the bank teller was laid up—suffering a concussion, Doc Boland said. They brought the doctor around to treat Ballard's wound; they wanted to be sure he would be able to stand trial. Sheriff Royce didn't bother with the prisoner, once he'd been booked, but the stout little man in the hard hat was a daily visitor.

"My firm is paid by the Denver bank that owns Sanders's branch," he told Ballard. "That means I've got to recover that forty thousand dollars. Why not knock off a few years of prison by talking?"

Ballard merely shook his head.

Keeler brought Pat McElvoy with him, another time. McElvoy was a grain and feed dealer, and it had been he who had fired at the bank robbers as they galloped from town with their loot. He was a fair man and said, "I'm not sure. I won't say it was Ballard I wounded. All three of those hombres were masked. I couldn't see their faces."

Keeler nodded, dismissed him. He told Ballard, "That doesn't harm you, but still it doesn't help you. Ready to talk, friend?"

"I have nothing to say, Keeler!"

"Well, take your time. You have a lot."

He didn't come in the next day, nor the next. Ballard saw nobody during that time but the prisoners in the other cells, and Deputy Sheriff Matt Graves, or another deputy, when meals were brought in or at exercise time. Then Keeler showed up again, and said, "Somebody to see you, Ballard."

Ballard was sitting on his cot, holding his head in his hands. He looked up, saw Keeler move away and a woman, a girl, take his place at the door. Ballard said thickly, "Louise!" He got shakenly to his feet.

He hadn't wanted her to come to such a place, yet every day he'd wondered why she hadn't visited him. Now Louise Donley said, in a voice that hinted at tears, "I came every day, Sam. They wouldn't let me see you." She pressed against the iron bars, holding out her hands to him.

For Sam Ballard, there was no other woman anywhere. He'd lost his heart to her the first time they met. She was a tall girl with dark hair and wide gray eyes. She was always grave, except for a small smile that, somehow, went right to the hard core of a man. She was still young, only twenty-six, but she'd never had time to be frivolous. Her father had died when she was very young, and since she and her mother had earned their livelihood by running the Venton House, the town's smaller hotel. Mother and daughter knew hard work for long hours each day, so Louise's lack of gaiety was understandable. The lack was not a fault. It made Louise even more desirable, and more men than Sam Ballard had wanted to change her name—Cleve Sanders among them. But Sam Ballard was the lucky one. Rather, he had been the lucky one. It no longer mattered that Louise Donley had said "yes" to him.

Ballard said, "It's bad, Louise. If I were guilty, they couldn't have more evidence against me."

"But how, Sam?"

"Those bank robbers stopped at my ranch, on their way to the badlands. They wanted a horse, and I was wounded when I refused to let them have one."

"But the money?"

"They threw it into my cabin, so I wouldn't object."

"Everyone thinks—"

"I know," Ballard said flatly. "Cleve Sanders cinched it by identifying me. He's wrong, Louise. If only he'd realize that—and tell Keeler. Cleve should know there's no sure identification of masked men."

"I'll talk to him, Sam," Louise said. She was silent a moment. Then, not looking directly at him: "Sam, I want to believe you. My heart tells me to believe you. But I keep thinking of what you said when you quit your job as foreman for the XIX Ranch and bought out Len Warden. You said, darling, that you'd made up your mind to make something of yourself—to get somewhere in a hurry. You said you'd take me away from the hotel and give me everything I needed or wanted. Sam, if because of me. . . ."

Ballard was jolted. This hit him harder than any of the rest. He had not believed that Louise would think him guilty. Despair already had a hold on him, and now anger came. He said bitterly, "Louise, you'd better go."

"It's not that I don't love you, Sam," Louise protested. "If you've done wrong—made a mistake—I'll stand by you. I'll wait, Sam. No matter how long, I'll wait. But I want you to make right that wrong. Mr. Keller says that if you—"

"So that's why Keeler let you come here," Ballard said savagely. "He figured you could get me to talk. The fool! They're all fools. They lock me up and let the guilty men get away with the loot." He paused, then said again, "Louise, you'd better go."

She gazed at him with misted eyes, saw the stiffness of his face, and knew that nothing more could be said. Slowly, Louise turned away. Ballard heard her sob. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Into the Badlands

KEELER didn't come back. He didn't show up the following day. Ballard was glad of it. He felt like strangling the tricky little detective. Sam Ballard paced the narrow confines of his cell like a caged animal. That night late—about midnight, Ballard judged—there was a commotion in the corridor that led back from the sheriff's office. Ballard got from his cot, went to the cell door. The only light was from a wall lamp at the end of the corridor, but its scant glow showed Ballard what was going on. Sheriff Royce and his deputy, Matt Graves, had made an arrest and were having trouble with the prisoner. It was taking both lawmen to shove the man back to an empty cell.

He was a burly hardcase, his heavy face

dark with a stubble of black beard. He was handcuffed, yet he fought savagely. Both lawmen had hold of him, and suddenly he bore them both to the floor with him. There was a wild melee, a harsh cursing. The prisoner struck out with his manacled hands, and Matt Graves let out a yell. Blood showed on the deputy's face. The prisoner used his boots on fat Sheriff Royce. Matt Graves drew his gun. He clubbed down twice, hard. The blows made ugly sodden sounds, and the prisoner sprawled on his face.

The lawmen got up, both muttering angry. They dragged the prisoner into the cell directly opposite Ballard's, dropped him on the floor, then withdrew and locked the door. Sheriff Royce was puffing, out of breath. Matt Graves wiped the blood off his face with his neckscarf, muttered, "I should've used a gun on him a lot sooner."

They went away, and Ballard returned to his cot. The new prisoner started to groan.

A couple times during the night, the new prisoner raised a rumpus that woke the half dozen other men in the cells. They started an uproar, yelling at him to keep quiet. By morning, he was in a more subdued mood. He made only one outburst, and that was at breakfast. Both of Royce's deputies appeared when it was time to take grub into the new prisoner. Matt Graves stood guard, hand on gun, while Ty Langley, unlocked the cell door and went inside. The prisoner cursed and shouted at them, but he seemed afraid of Graves's gun this morning.

Later he rattled his door to attract Sam Ballard's attention. He wanted to know, "You getting out of here soon?"

"No. Why?"

"I got to send word to some friends of mine."

"You can't get word to them through me, Ballard told him. "I'm headed for Laramie Prison."

"Yeah? What for?"

"They claim I was in on the Venton Bank robbery."

"You're innocent, I suppose," the other man said, and chuckled. "Well, they claim I was in on that train robbery the other week. They're loco. If I'd been in on that job, I wouldn't have been hanging around these parts. What's your name, friend?"

Ballard told him, and the new prisoner said, "Mine's Mike Harmon." He was silent for a time, thoughtful. Then: "My friends could get me out of here, if I could only get word to them. They've got plenty of money, see? They could hire a lawyer who'd make these badge-toters give an innocent man his rights. I've got to let them know, somehow!"

"Where are your friends?"

"I could get word to them through Mort Stabley," Mike Harmon said. "He's a rancher down Tower Rock Creek way. If I could get a message through to him without the sheriff knowing about it. . . . You got any friends here in town that you can trust, Ballard?"

Ballard shook his head. "Not a one," he muttered.

* * *

Deputy Ty Langley came alone that evening to serve the prisoners' supper. When he unlocked Mike Harmon's cell door, he patted his gun and said, "Sit down on your cot, mister—and stay there." He didn't go inside until Harmon obeyed. But when he got inside, Harmon leapt up and rushed against him. Harmon dropped the tray of food, tried to get his gun out. But Harmon picked him up bodily, flung him against the stone wall. It was Harmon who got hold of the gun, as Langley slumped to the floor. Sam Ballard saw Harmon raise the sixgun like a club. He heard the blow. Harmon had a wild look about him as he came from the cell. Ballard rattled his door.

"Mike, get his keys! Let me out of here!"

Harmon had started along the cell-block toward the door to the sheriff's office—to freedom. Ballard yelled at him again, as were some of the other prisoners. Harmon hesitated, then turned back. He got the deputies keys, came and unlocked Ballard's door. "Come on," he muttered. "But don't get in my way!"

Ballard followed him from the cell-block, and they found the office empty. They crossed and opened the street door. It wasn't fully dark, but the dusk would give them some cover. Ballard nudged his companion, and whispered, "Those saddle mounts in front of the saloon."

"We'll try it," Harmon said, and moved out into the street.

They walked slowly, for two running men would have attracted the attention of the people on the street. Angling across the street, they reached the horses at the saloons' hitch-rack. Each man untied a mount, swung to the saddle. Ballard thought edgily, *It's easy—almost too easy.* He swung in beside Harmon and they rode along Venton's main street at an easy lope.

No alarm had yet sounded when they crossed the wooden bridge over the creek at the south end of town. Harmon reined in, and said, "I'm heading for Mort Stabley's ranch. Where you going, Ballard?"

Ballard didn't know what to say. He hadn't been prepared for this. He'd merely jumped at the chance to escape, on impulse. "I don't know," he said. "I'll head anywhere that's beyond reach of the law."

"You want to come with me?"

"Sure; if it's all right with you."

"Let's go, then," said Mike Harmon, and kicked spurs to his stolen horse.

As Ballard rode after him, three shots rang out back in Venton. Ty Langley had come to and was sounding the alarm. But it didn't matter. It was growing dark. A posse couldn't track escaped prisoners at night.

THEY kept to the road south for half a dozen miles, then Mike Harmon muttered, "We'll head west." They came to the XIX Ranch's southern range, opened the gate in the barbwire fence, and entered. Harmon was leading the way to the low hills west of the XIX, and that meant a ride of a dozen miles. They traveled easily, saving their mounts. Mike Harmon didn't talk much. Ballard had plenty of time to think.

Ballard didn't like this. He was free, yet it wasn't exactly freedom. It was better than a jail cell, but not much better. A man on the dodge wasn't free in the real sense of the word; he simply wasn't confined to a space eight feet square. But Ballard felt better. He had been gripped by black despair during every minute he spent behind bars. Now despair was gone. He had a faint hope.

It would be possible, even while dodging the posse that was sure to follow, to make an attempt to prove his innocence. How? Ballard asked himself. He could try to find the three men—the bank robbers—who had gotten him into this jam. What he could do if he found them, Ballard did not know at the moment. They wouldn't give themselves up and confess to clear him—unless perhaps to save their lives!

Once in the hills, Harmon led the way to a little valley. Ballard saw a wide stretch of water, silvery-black in the darkness, and knew they'd arrived at Mirror Lake. He'd been this way years ago. But he saw no signs of a ranch, and so was surprised when Harmon reined in. The man dismounted, tossed his reins to Ballard, and said, "Water the horses. I'll be back in maybe half an hour."

He went off afoot, disappearing into the darkness. Ballard took the horses to the lake's edge and let them drink. He dismounted and drank, then sat down on a rock. Harmon seemed a long time gone, and Ballard found that he didn't like being alone. He'd been alone in his cell, of course, but then his mind had been numbed by despair. Now he could think, even though not wanting to, and his thoughts were ugly. He got to thinking of Louise, and he didn't want to think of her any more. That was over and done with, lost along with her faith in him.

Ballard's mind reached back to that night at his ranch, with the storm approach and the three outlaws riding out of the darkness. Their faces had been obscure, but one's name was Jake. Somewhere, somehow, Ballard knew, he had to find that Jake. His mind switched to the questioning he had undergone when the lawmen had taken him to Venton—to Cleve Sander's definite identification of him. And Ballard thought, *Why was he so sure? Why hadn't he been a little doubtful?*

Ballard realized that he should have wondered about that before. He should have been suspicious from the moment Cleve Sanders said, "I have to identify you." He should have suspected that a man wouldn't make a mistake like that. He should have known that Cleve Sanders was lying!

Mike Harmon came back from wherever he had gone. He was pleased with himself. He struck a match, chuckled and said, "Take a look, Ballard." He was holding a sheaf of papers, and Ballard gave a start when he say they were sheets of

currency—money still uncut and unsigned. The bank notes were of ten-dollar denomination, and Mike Harmon had several thousand dollars in his hand.

The match went out. Harmon rolled the uncut money and thrust it inside his shirt. "Fresh from the Government plant," he said. "It came off that train that was held up the other week, partner. Out of the express car safe. It was on its way to a Nevada bank."

"You were in on that hold-up, Mike?"

"Sure!"

Ballard was jolted. He said, "What good is that money to you? It's unsigned. It's worthless without a bank official's signature."

"All I need to be a bank official is a pen and a bottle of ink," Harmon said, laughing. "Well, let's get going."

They mounted and went on through the hills, Harmon's spirits climbing higher and Ballard's sinking lower. Harmon said finally, "We'll reach Stabley's place at dawn. He'll give us fresh horses and outfit us for a stay in the badlands." He turned and gave Ballard a searching look. "Where'd you cache the loot from the bank job?"

"I wasn't in on that hold-up."

"You what—"

"That's the truth, Mike."

"Well, I'll be hanged!" Mike Harmon muttered.

But the curious glances he kept giving Ballard proved that he didn't believe it was the truth.

MORT STABLEY'S ranch was a greasy-sack outfit far back in the hills, its buildings ramshackle, and its cattle wild in the brush. Stabley and his two sons were three slow-moving scarecrows. A whiskey jug stood handy on the ranchhouse's rickety stoop, and an old Sharps buffalo gun leaned against the plank wall. Mort Stabley chewed thoughtfully on his tobacco cud after Mike Harmon had told him what he wanted. "Horses, grub, and guns," the rancher finally said. "Maybe I'd be willing to make a deal."

"We're in a hurry, Mort," Harmon said.

"Sure." Stabley was eyeing the two horses Harmon and Ballard were riding. "XIX horses, eh?"

"We picked them up in Venton."

"I'll have to get rid of them, pronto," Stabley said.

It was an hour before they got away from the ranch, despite Mike Harmon's attempt to hurry the man. They rode out on fairly good horses, and each man had a flour-sack bulging with grub tied to his saddle. Stabley had also supplied each with a gun rig and six-shooter and a Winchester rifle. Payment had been made inside the shack, and Ballard did not know in what sort of coin. He asked no questions of Harmon; Ballard had made up his mind to part company with the burly hardcase.

An hour's ride from Stabley's place, Harmon halted and said they were safe enough to rustle a meal and get some sleep. They built a fire, then scattered it after bacon and beans and coffee were cooked. They wanted no smoke to signal their whereabouts. They ate in a hurry, in silence, then Harmon brought out tobacco sack and papers that he'd gotten from Mort Stabley. They rolled cigarettes, smoked them short, and then Harmon moved into the shade of a willow. He stretched out, covered his face with his hat, and soon was snoring.

It occurred to Sam Ballard that now was the time to quit the hardcase. But the effort wasn't in him. After a sleepless night, with a full belly, he felt like taking his ease. Ballard moved over under the willow, sat with his back to its trunk, and, almost at once, dozed off. When he woke, the sun was almost directly overhead. He gave a start, scrambled to his feet—and Mike Harmon was gone.

In a way, the joke was on Ballard. After leaving the Stabley place, he'd made up his mind to quit the hardcase. But it had been Harmon who had done the quitting. Why, Ballard couldn't guess. And after a moment, he didn't care. Harmon had left half of the outfit—that is, a horse and one sack of grub and weapons. Whatever Mike Harmon might be, he wasn't a man to leave another stranded without necessities. Ballard walked to the still saddled, ground-hitched horse. He mounted and rode on, heading deeper into the outlaw country.

Ballard's plans were hazy. He was sure of only one thing; he had to keep on the dodge. Having made good his jailbreak, he dared not give the law a chance to re-

capture him. His escape must make him appear doubly guilty. But he felt safe enough. He was in the *buscadero* country —a wilderness that stretched all the way from Southern Wyoming to Mexico. For badge-toters, it was a no man's land. Seldom, if ever, had lawmen penetrated far into that malpais of dim trails.

But beyond keeping his freedom, Ballard had no definite plans. His hope of proving his innocence was a fool's dream. He could clear himself only by finding the three men who had held up the Venton Bank, and that trio could be five hundred miles away by now. He did not know them. He knew only that one's name was Jake. And that wasn't enough. But something else bothered Ballard. It was a thought that crowded all others out of his mind. It became an obsession. More than anything else it was a question: Why did Cleve Sanders lie?

The banker had lied. He hadn't made a mistake in identifying Sam Ballard as one of the bank robbers. Sanders had deliberately erred. He had pointed out Ballard as one of the outlaws for some reason. Because of Louise? Ballard asked himself.

It was possible. Cleve Sanders was a big-town man, a handsome dude who considered himself a ladies' man. He had been jolted when Louise turned him down and announced that she had promised to marry Sam Ballard. Sanders had played the good loser, but Ballard remembered the ugly look that had come into his eyes even while he smiled. Yes, it might be that Cleve Sanders had wanted Ballard in a jam so that he might have another chance at Louise Donley. Men had done stranger things for women far less desirable. But Ballard was not sure that Sanders had thrown him to the law only because of the girl.

There had to be another reason. Sanders may have wanted a scapegoat, and so jumped at the opportunity of pinning the robbery on the first suspect. Ballard could find only one need for a scapegoat: to throw the lawmen off the trail of the men really guilty. If that was Sander's aim, then he was trying to cover up for the bank robbers because he had been involved in the crime. It could be nothing else. ***But why would a man help rob his own bank?*** Ballard asked himself. The answer came at once: *The Venton Bank wasn't Cleve Sanders' own; he was merely its salaried head!*

Sam Ballard was sure of all that. He could find no other explanation for Sanders having pointed him out as one of the hold-up bunch. But he needed proof—evidence that would convince skeptical lawmen. He would find that evidence, by finding the outlaw named Jake and his two *compadres*. And find those three, Sam Ballard would. Even though it took one year or ten. He wanted to clear himself. But even more now, he wanted to brand Cleve Sanders with the mark of guilt!

RIDERS in the badlands minded their own business. Sam Ballard sighted riders half a dozen times during the three days after parting with Mike Harmon, yet never got within hailing distance of them. Almost as soon as he glimpsed them, they were gone from sight. The *buscadero* clan kept to the brush and rocks, traveled always within easy reach of cover. The uneasy knowledge came with the outlaw fraternity shying away. Ballard was convinced that word of his coming to the back country had been spread over some mysterious grapevine. That was why he could not contact any other riders; they knew that though he was on the dodge, he was still not one of the owlhoot fraternity. An innocent man wrongly accused was not to be trusted by real outlaws.

Ballard rode boldly by day, but at night he made a cold camp. After cooking up a meal, he would scatter his fire and warily bed down elsewhere. If he was right in believing that his presence in the malpais had been noted, it was likely that the Venton Bank robbers would guess that he was on their trail. Certainly it was known that he had been arrested for the hold-up, and escaped only through a stroke of luck. The third day Ballard discovered that he had properly gauged his position. He was being followed.

So far as he could tell there was but one rider on his trail. The man kept well back, and well hidden—an expert at stalking. Ballard was traveling through rough country, rocky hills and desolate canyons, when he first glimpsed the rider. Ballard spent the entire afternoon in attempts to trick his

pursuer; at first he tried to lose the man, and then, that failing, he tried, unsuccessfully, to waylay him. But no matter whether he changed his course or bushed up, Ballard couldn't shake the rider or bring him within rifle range.

It was not a lawman. Ballard was sure of that, for a badge-toter, once on a trail, would crowd his luck and attempt to get the chase over in a hurry. This seemed like a man on a bushwhack trail, and Sam Ballard's nerves began to knot up. He was jumpy all that day, and that night he kept his fire burning after eating. He took his rifle, took up a vigilance among a stand of rocks, but the fire burned down to a bed of embers and then grew cold—and no one approached it. In the morning, however, Ballard saw a rider watching his camp from a ridge half a mile away. When he saddled up and rode on, the rider followed him—still at a distance.

Ballard tried to circle around and get behind him, but the rider disappeared. Ballard didn't see him again until late afternoon, when he neared a towering butte. The rider was perhaps a mile behind him, also crossing the rocky sand flats. Ballard pressed on toward the butte, seeking water. He was trailing north, now, and the butte was Hide-Out Rock—a landmark no more than thirty miles west of Ballard's own valley range.

He came upon a water-hole at sundown, drank and watered his horse. The rider on his trail lost himself among a stand of rocks to the south. *He'll have to come in for water,* Ballard thought grimly. *Or turn back.* He meant to mount guard over that water-hole until the other man was forced in for a showdown or driven off. But as he munched some grub left from his cooked breakfast, Ballard saw smoke from a campfire or a cabin chimney rising from the low rock hills north of the butte. He changed his mind. The rider to the south was too wily to be easily trapped, while whoever had the fire in the hills seemed unwary, and might be approached. It might be a man who knew something about the outlaw named Jake.

Ballard studied the rock hills, judged that the smoke rose from a small canyon not more than a mile away. He waited until full dark, then mounted and rode slowly north. When the hills loomed before him, Ballard dismounted and left his horse ground-hitched. He went on afoot, with his rifle, and crept into the brush-tangled canyon. He saw the glow of a campfire, and cautiously moved toward it. Finally he crouched behind a boulder overlooking the camp. There was a shallow stream and some scrub trees, and somewhere in the darkness a horse stamped and switched. A man lay by the fire in his blankets. Ballard waited until his muscles ached, but the prone man showed no signs of being aware of him. There was nothing to show Ballard that the man was not alone.

Coming from behind the boulder, Ballard called, "Hello, the camp!" The man did not move or answer. Walking forward, rifle ready, Ballard was gripped by the uneasy feeling that something was wrong—that this was a trap. He jumped when a hollow voice said, "What you want?"

But there was nothing to fear from the man. In the flickering glow of the fire, his face was gray and gaunt. Feverish eyes stared out of the bony face. Ballard knew that he was looking upon a dying man—a very young one, at that. A kid not more than twenty.

Ballard said, "What's ailing you, friend?"

The cold-looking lips whispered, "Bullet through my guts."

"How long?"

"I don't know, any more. Maybe a week."

"Who's looking after you?"

A voice Ballard had heard before growled, "We're looking out for him, Ballard. Drop that rifle. We've got you covered."

Ballard muttered an oath, but obeyed. The man said, "Now unbuckle your gunbelt and let it drop."

CHAPTER THREE

Boothill's for Bankers, Too!

WHEN Ballard had done that, two men came into the glow of the fire. "We had word of you," one growled. "You broke out of the Venton jail after getting yourself arrested for that bank hold-up we pulled. We heard too that you've been prowling through the badlands. What's the idea, Ballard? Did you figure you could

jump us and take us in to clear yourself? If that's your game, you're crazy!"

The speaker was a burly hardcase with a jagged scar along his left cheek. He went on, "We'd have been in Arizona, maybe in Mexico, by now if Pete hadn't stopped a bullet at Venton. Damn the dirty son that shot him! We couldn't leave the kid, and we couldn't get him to a doctor. He's dying, Ballard, and when he's buried we're pulling out, Jake and me. Nobody's going to stop us. Not you, Ballard, or anybody!"

Ballard shrugged. "Sure," he said bitterly. "I was a fool to think I could handle you three. I should've known that from the way you gunned me down that night at my ranch. But a man can't be blamed for trying to save himself from prison. I didn't have a chance of clearing myself after Cleve Sanders said I was one of the hold-up crowd."

The burly outlaw said, "Sanders did that? We didn't hear of that play. We figured those badge-toters followed our trail to your spread and took you in because they had to arrest somebody." He began to chuckle. "That Sanders is a tricky one. He must've blamed you to cover up for us."

"I figured he was in on that hold-up."

"Sure; Sanders planned it," the outlaw said. "He sent to Denver for us. We knew him there, before his old man decided to put him to work. He's a rich man's son, and he likes big money. He had the job all planned, even down to us slugging the teller. He had the loot all handy. We just had to reach into the safe—for twenty thousand dollars."

"And Sanders took another twenty thousand for himself," Ballard said. "Damn him! When I get my hands on him—"

"You won't get the chance, Ballard," the outlaw muttered, his amusement gone. "We can't let you squeal on the dude. We can't let you loose to squeal on us. You're the only hombre who knows that we—"

A rattly, gasping sound came from the dying man. The burly hardcase said, "Jake, take a look at the kid." He didn't take his eyes away from Ballard, but Jake moved to Pete. After a long moment, Jake muttered, "He's gone, Len. Nothing more we can do for him."

That seemed to unnerve the burly Len. He frowned, muttered, "You sure?" He turned a little, toward Jake and the dead man. It was a slim chance for Ballard, the only chance he'd get, and he took it. Ballard grabbed for his sixgun on the ground.

Jake shouted, "Watch it, Len!" But Ballard already had hold of his gunbelt, and he kept on moving. His quick leap spoiled the shot Len fired at his back. And before Len could fire again, another gun roared. Len cried out, dropped his weapon, clawed at his chest. He was collapsing as Ballard got his gun clear of its holster. Jake's gun blazed in Ballard's direction, twice in quick

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wild shots, and Ballard fired and missed. He fired a second time as Jake was taking more careful aim. Jake dropped without a sound.

Ballard kept moving, backed away from the firelight. But the gun that had downed Len didn't blast again. Ballard crouched down behind some rocks, waited, and finally a voice—Mike Harmon's voice—yelled, "Drop your gun, Ballard. Come out with your hands up!"

Ballard gave a start. This then was who had been trailing him—Mike Harmon. Ballard's mind, a little dazed from the shooting and sudden death, grappled with that. He saw how it was. Harmon hadn't believed his claim of innocence. He had ridden out only to give Ballard a chance to go his way. Harmon had thought Ballard would lead him to the bank loot. And it had worked out that way.

"You hear me, Ballard?" Harmon demanded. "Come out with your hands up."

"Come and get me!"

"Don't be a fool, Ballard," Harmon said. "Don't make me kill you. Better to spend a few years behind bars than to be a dead man!"

"What're you talking about?"

"I've got a badge pinned to my undershirt, Ballard."

"You're lying, damn you!"

There was a long moment of quiet, and Ballard strained to see some furtive movement in the darkness beyond the range of the firelight. But Harmon was well hidden. Finally the man called out, "It was all planned, Ballard. Keeler planned it, and I'm like him—a detective agency man. Keeler figured we'd never catch your partners or recover the bank loot, if we waited for you to talk. So he sent for me, and I let the sheriff lock me up as a train robber. We wanted to win your confidence, Ballard, and let you think you were escaping. . . . You were taken in by it."

"Smart talk, Harmon!"

"It's gospel," Harmon said. "We'd already recovered some of the unsigned money taken in the train robbery, so I used it to bait you. I wanted you to believe for sure that I was outside the law. When I saw you wouldn't talk even to an outlaw, I decided to try something else. So I left you, and trailed you here."

"Now you figure on taking me in?"

"I'd rather take you in than kill you."

"I wasn't in with these three," Ballard said, angrily. "You know that. You heard what we were talking about, and saw them try to kill me. Three men held up the bank, and all of them are here dead."

"Maybe so," Harmon replied. "But I wasn't close enough to hear what was being said. I didn't get close until the shooting started. Maybe you weren't with them after the hold-up, but Cleve Sanders said you were along when the robbery was pulled. I don't know where the extra man came from, and I'm not worrying about it. I've got a rifle and you've got only a six-gun, Ballard. I'm better at this Injun game than you are. So you'd better give up!"

There was reason in that. Ballard knew that Harmon had the edge on him. The detective could wait until daylight and pick him off with his rifle. Life was precious, after all, and life behind bars for a few years would be better than dying here.

Ballard said thickly, "All right, Harmon. I'm throwing my gun out."

He flung the sixgun as far as he could, so that Harmon could see it fall by the fire. He rose, lifted his hands shoulder-high, and walked to the fire. Mike Harmon came in, rifle held ready.

He said, "Why'd they try to kill you, Ballard? Didn't they want to give you your share of the loot?"

Ballard didn't answer that. His face was rocky, as he said, "I'll tell you just one thing, Harmon. You'll find only half the loot here. Cleve Sanders was in on the robbery, and he kept twenty thousand dollars."

"Sanders!"

"That's right, Harmon."

"This thing gets crazier all the time," Harmon muttered. "Where is the loot?"

He began searching, ransacking the saddles and campgear. He pulled a bulging gunnysack from the bottom of the pile, and there was a metallic jingle of coins. Harmon was a little excited now. He lay down his rifle, opened the sack. Ballard edged over behind him and, just as the man muttered a warning, struck out. The blow caught Harmon just behind the left ear. He lost his balance, spilled over the pile of saddles and gear. But even as he fell he grabbed for his sixgun. Ballard didn't try to buck that quick gun. He kept on

moving, crouching low and running. He plunged into the brush as Harmon's gun blasted. He heard the whine of the slug. The second shot didn't come near him. Ballard kept on running until he was clear of the canyon and had reached his horse. He swung to the saddle, lifted the animal in a lope, and headed east through the darkness.

BALLARD reached his valley range in the gray dawn. He headed for the ranch buildings without taking any precautions, but evidently no lawmen were watching his place. He was surprised to see that rustlers hadn't made an inroads on his herd, but horse thieves had been busy. He saw only four of his string as he rode along the valley. One of these, a sorrel gelding, he roped and took with him. Dismounting at the corral, he tied the sorrel to the fence and removed the saddle from the bay he had been riding. He carried the flour-sack, with what was left of the grub, into his cabin.

He sensed at once that someone had been there during his absence. There was some change. The place had been tidied up, swept, dusted, everything put in neat order. The bunk was made up, and the pots and pans and skillet were washed clean and hanging on the wall by the fire-place. A can of tobacco that Ballard had never seen before stood on the table, with his old pipe atop it. He stared at the pipe and tobacco can for a long time, trying to read something into it. He couldn't understand why anyone should have cleaned up his and left him fresh tobacco. Then he knew. He thought, *Louise,* and took up the tobacco can. He found the note deep in the stuff.

It read, "Sam: I'm sorry for that day at the jail, and I want you to forgive me. I never doubted you for a moment, but Mr. Keeler insisted that I could help you by asking you to tell the truth. I promised to do it, only because I wanted to see you. Please believe that, Sam. I'll come here every Sunday, in the hope that you'll find this—and meet me. There's something I've found out, something I've got to tell you. It's only a suspicion, but I think Cleve Sanders knows who really held up the bank. Please meet me, darling. Yours, Louise."

The flinty hardness went out of Sam Ballard's face. He smiled, read the note a second time while his mind conjured up the picture of Louise. He should have known. A girl like Louise Donley was loyal.

But he wouldn't wait until Sunday. In fact, he had no idea when Sunday would come. He'd lost all track of time.

Ballard folded the note, tucked it away in his shirt pocket. He went to the chest at the end of the bunk, took from it a long-barrelled .45 Colt. He thrust it into his waistband, took a Winchester from his gun-rack, and went out to his horse.

Ballard took a back trail instead of the wagon road, and avoided ranches where he and his record were apt to be known. Late in the afternoon, he stopped at a nester farm in the Trinity Hills and got a hand-out meal. He rode on a few miles, then halted to wait for darkness. Venton was but two miles away.

Ballard entered the town by a side street, then swung into an alley-way. If he was seen at all, the darkness made him just another rider in from some ranch. He reached the rear of the Venton House, avoiding the lamplight spilling from the kitchen windows. His knock brought the Chinese cook to the door, and the cook fetched Louise.

She came into Ballard's arms, cried a little with her face pressed against his shoulder. Then alarm came, and she whispered, "You shouldn't have come here, Sam! The danger—"

"I'm going to settle this thing tonight," he told her. "What did you want to tell me about Cleve Sanders?"

Her body, pressed against his, grew tense. "Maybe I'm wrong, darling," she whispered, "but I believe he deliberately accused you of being one of the hold-up crowd when he knew who the robbers really were. His manner has changed. There's something behind the things he says."

"What does he say, Louise?"

"He calls the sheriff and his deputies and the detective, Mr. Keeler, fools. He says that it's easy for a smart man to get rich, because the world is so full of fools. He laughed about your escape, and said I should forget you because you'd be recaptured or killed or always on the dodge. He said that I should forget you, and go away with him."

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"You're right about him, Louise."

"It's only suspicion, Sam, not proof," she went on. "But his talk about a smart man getting rich must mean something. He said that if I would leave Venton with him, he'd take me East and buy me jewelry and fine clothes. Sam, he must have had something to do with that hold-up. Where else would he have gotten so much money, so suddenly?"

"He was in on it," Ballard said. "I found that out, and that's why I came to town. Somehow I'll make him admit it."

"But if you're seen, Sam!"

"I'll risk that," Ballard told the girl. "Wait for me."

She clung to him fiercely, but he finally broke away.

BALLARD mounted and rode boldly to the street, to the brick bank building. It was a two-storied building, and Cleve Sanders lived in the rooms on the second floor. The windows above were lighted, showing that Sanders was at home. An open wooden stairway at the side led to the banker's door. Ballard dismounted and climbed the stairs, and knocked. Sanders opened the door wide at once. He had his hat and coat on, so must have been about to leave his rooms.

He said, "Yes? What is it?" Then fright twisted his dark face like a spasm. He gasped, "Ballard!"

"You should've known I'd figure it out and come back, Cleve."

"What—what do you mean?"

"You know what I mean," Ballard said, almost shouting in the rage surging through him. "You identified me as one of the bank robbers because of Louise and because you saw a chance to throw the law off the trail of the men who really pulled that hold-up. You were in on that job, Cleve. You got half the loot!"

Sanders had gotten control of himself. "If you think you can prove that," he said, "I'll go to the sheriff with you."

He stepped out onto the landing, pulling the door closed behind him. And caught Ballard off guard. Sanders drove his knee into Ballard's belly, then drove his fist hard into his face. Ballard reeled back, lost his balance, tumbled down the wooden steps.

Sanders drew a gun from inside his coat and began firing down at him.

Even as he fell, Ballard got his own gun out. When he hit the ground, he leapt up and opened fire. Sanders was too eager, shooting too fast. Ballard took an instant to aim, then squeezed the trigger as carefully as though he were shooting mark. Sanders cried out, dropped his pocket gun, tilted forward. He came plunging downward so loosely that Ballard knew he was dead. The body sprawled on the ground almost at Ballard's feet.

Men were shouting, came running along the street. But a man already behind Ballard said, "Good shooting, Ballard. I couldn't have done better."

Ballard whirled about, saw Mike Harmon there with the stout little Keeler behind him. Harmon took the gun from Ballard's hand, and said, "I just got in. I was at the hotel talking to Keeler when Miss Donley told us that you were in town. She wanted us to arrest Sanders, Ballard. Funny how women are. No matter how tough their men are, they worry about them. Miss Donley was afraid Sanders would get the best of you."

"He did, at that," Ballard said bitterly. "He forced me to kill him, and dead he can't clear me. I wanted to make him admit he had a part in that hold-up."

"He wouldn't have talked," Harmon said. "But somebody else did talk. You shouldn't have slugged me, Ballard. Len Bateman wasn't dead when you made your getaway. He was unconscious and dying, and lasted an hour longer. He came to just before he died, and he talked. He told me about Sanders—and he cleared you."

"You mean—?"

"You're in the clear, Ballard," Mike Harmon said, and returned Ballard's gun. "You'd better go tell Miss Donley, so she stops worrying."

Sam Ballard went, a little dazedly. He pushed through the swelling crowd of curious townspeople, walked toward the Venton House. Halfway, he broke into a run—for he saw Louise coming to meet him. Then, with her in his arms, he had only to forget. And forgetting promised to be pleasant.

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(Continued from page 50)

McBride announced. "Curly ought to be gettin' back."

Curly had ridden to Juan Villareal's with orders. Juan was to saddle a horse and make the long ride to Cisco for the sheriff.

"He'll get back," Sledge said placidly. "Curly generally gets back. Him an' me are goin' to take turns watchin' them beauties inside tonight. An' quit frettin', McBride. You don't have a thing to worry about. Them boys are goin' to tell what Norwood planned. Hell, the sheriff an' the whole damn country's goin' to thank you."

McBride stirred irritably. Sledge said, "Why don't you go to the house? You ain't never paid the balance on them cattle yet. Ain't you goin' to?"

"That's right." McBride got up with feigned nonchalance. "I ain't, have I?" He walked toward the house. Dave Fairweather arose to follow, for he had attached himself to McBride.

"You stay here, kid," Sledge ordered. "All he was lookin' for was a half-good excuse."

McBride knocked on the door. He heard the call, "Come in," and pushed the door open. Lois was sitting in a rocking chair and about her the kitchen was neat and clean and homelike. "Sit down, McBride," she invited.

McBride did not sit down. "I come up about the cattle," he announced heavily. "Jim recalled it to me. I ain't paid you the balance on 'em yet."

"Is that all you came for, McBride?" In the dim light Lois' face was white and flowerlike, tipped up a little, still waiting.

"No," said McBride, "it ain't. Look, Lois, I ain't much good. I don't have much, but—"

"I don't even know your first name," Lois said softly. "Come here, McBride."

Down on the bunkhouse porch young Dave Fairweather asked a question. "You reckon McBride will take me with him when he goes? I'd miss Lois an' you an' Curly, an' all, but I'd sure like to go with him."

Old Jim Sledge grunted and straightened his peg leg out before him.

"You ain't goin' to miss nobody, kid," he said. "McBride ain't goin' no place."

THE END

HERE'S LEAD IN YOUR TEETH!

(Continued from page 70)

the hay fell through for Gripper's attention was jerked that way and the man took an unconscious step closer. In the same split second Sam stepped sidewise and launched himself into open air. It was a ten foot drop, and he came down in hurtling dead weight. Gripper saw him, but the action occupied only a fraction of time. He whipped up his gun and fired, but it was wild. Sam landed on top of him. Both crashed into the trampled, muddy snow.

Sheriff Pickering had landed, an easy fall into slush, and scrambled up. Yet he was not needed. The impact had laid Hobey Gripper out cold. Sam picked up the man's gun, a grin breaking the tension on his face. His own breath had been knocked from him, and he raised himself erect to see the sheriff helping Lispeth out of the burning barn.

Both came to Sam and helped him to his feet, and Sam heeled around to see about his pack animals. They had bunched in the lower corral end were being warmed up a little, but were not in danger. Sheriff Pickering looked at Sam and grinned.

"Well, Sam, it's tied up neat with a pretty ribbon on it. This skunk will go in Windy Bill's cell. And is Bill going to give me a cussing out!"

That evening Sam once more sat in the warm, cozy kitchen out at Edgertons'. Old Windy Bill was in high spirits. He gave Sam a wicked grin.

"Son, some day I'm going to learn to keep my big mouth shut." Then he chuckled. "But not for a while yet, I reckon."

THE END

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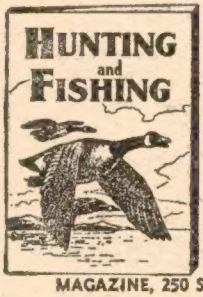

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The Quickest Grave!

By DAVE SANDS

VIOLENT DEATH by six-shooter, knife or rifle was common enough in Tombstone's heyday. But more dreaded because it struck without warning and respected neither age nor youth was the black killer—cholera. An example of the fear with which men viewed this disease is given light in the record of the burial of Johnny Adair, no doubt one of the fastest burials on record.

Young Adair of the Double Dobe ranch rode into Tombstone with his friends to see the sights. Cholera struck him down that same evening and his friends drove him out to a Mexican woman who had a cabin out on the mesa. The señora, who was immune to the disease, agreed to nurse the cowboy.

His friends withdrew to another cabin a half mile away, standing by to render what long distance help they could. After five days the Mexican nurse waddled up and standing just within earshot of the cabin cried out the news that Señor Juanito was dead. Johnny's friends took the notice with grim-lipped silence. The problem became: How to bury Johnny without endangering their lives. Silently they scooped out a grave on the mesa.

Then they retired to the cabin, drew cards to determine who would officiate as mortician.

Red Conway was the loser. He tossed his card onto the table and went outside to saddle. The Mexican woman was waiting as he rode up to the sagging shack. She pushed the door open and pointed inside. Johnny lay on a blanket on the floor, his feet pointing toward Red. Loosening his lariat, Red shook out a noose, tossed the loop over the dead man's boots and spurring his horse into a gallop he raced across the mesa for the grave, the corpse bouncing and dragging at the end of his rope.

His companions were waiting as he rode up. Johnny was dragged into the grave and as Red shook his noose free the others made the dirt fly, establishing a world's record in funerals.

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